

CENTERED

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Michael Loew was centered as a person and his art was always solidly centered as well. From his early, Ashcan-inspired paintings of urban life, such as *Paradise Alley* of 1931 (pl. 1), which has a rectangular window shape at its very center that anchors the multi-directional axes of the rooftop clutter, to his freest abstractions of the 1960s, the primary material is centered in the field. And, more often than not there is some painting incident marking its centerpoint. For instance, the tip of the orange and black triangle in an untitled 1946 painting (pl. 2), points directly at it, and it passes through the middle of the untitled 1957 abstraction's large copper rectangle in both directions (pl. 3). *Old Gold*, 1959 (pl. 4), has a small dot at its center, to give just three examples. The result is stability, which permitted him freedom with color, with paint application, and with structural dynamics. It also allowed him to change, and he took advantage of that.



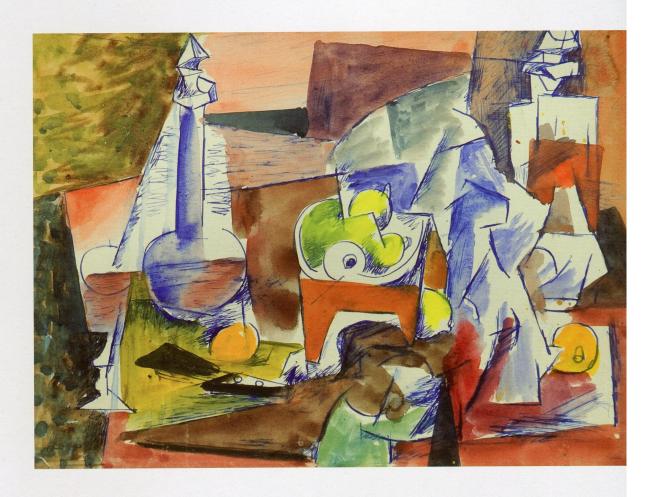
1. **Paradise Alley**, 1931 oil on canvas, 17³/₄ x 25 inches signed, titled and dated at lower right Born in 1907 among New York's immigrant poor, he was apprenticed after high school to a maker of stained glass, which may explain the transparency of his color for the rest of his life. In the late 1920s he studied at the Art Students League with the Ashcan painters who had made his milieu their subject matter. After a few years (1929–31) of study in France on a Sadie A. May Fellowship,¹ which included working for a time under Cubist Orthon Friesze, he returned to New York and

took up Ashcan realism himself, but with a measure of simplification and near abstraction that reflected his absorption of modernism in Paris. In 1933 his work was noted for its "militancy" concerning "inequality and class oppression"



in an exhibition held by the John Reed Club titled The Social Viewpoint in Art.² Most of the artists active in New York during the 1930s, and like Loew from 1933 to 1937 working as a WPA artist on the Easel Project, were left leaning if not outright Socialists or Communists. On the Easel Project you were paid to do your own work in the studio and gave a certain percent of your production to the government. Loew was politically active on behalf of artists, and for a while head of the Artists' Union. He also painted five murals for a New York high school and the next year was awarded a commission to paint murals for the New York World's Fair of 1939. He shared this private commission with his friend Willem De Kooning, who, as an illegal alien was not eligible for government work. Their modernistic murals for the Hall of Pharmacy were highly praised. From 1939 to 1940 Loew traveled and painted in Mexico and the Yucatan where the many public murals of Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros probably reinforced his belief in the efficacy of "art for the people." On his return in 1940, and again in 1941, he won Honorable Mentions in National Mural Competitions and was awarded mural commissions for post offices in Ohio and Pennsylvania.

3. **Untitled**, 1957 oil on canvas, 38 x 34 inches signed and dated verso



Michael Loew was a Battalion Painter for the U.S. Navy Seabees between 1943 and 1945, serving in the Pacific. All the artwork he did overseas, from portraits the sailors sent home to their families to murals for the mess halls was representational. That factor, plus losing his hair and his hearing, and seeing a lot of reality he surely wished he hadn't, turned him into a confirmed abstractionist on his return to civilian life in New York. Starting over, in a sense, he studied with Hans Hofmann in New York and Provincetown, and with Fernand Léger in Paris. Hofmann's influence is readily discernible in the 1946 *Still Life* (pl. 5) of a blue bottle, vase, and picture on a table with a glass and some red fruit. It's a typical Hofmann subject laid out in flat planes of color pushing and pulling in space, the objects Cubistically conceptualized in lines and the color Fauvistically full-bodied. Works on paper of the same time, such as *Still Life No.* 1 (pl. 6), are more traditionally Cubist. Loew taught himself all he could about European developments out of Cubism, and artists like Piet Mondrian, the Abstraction/Creation group, and the Russian Constructivists. At home, there

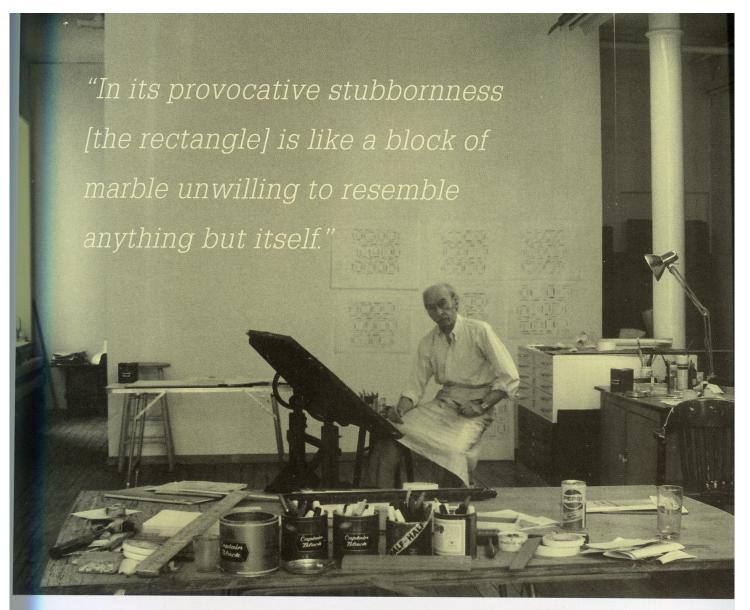
Still Life No. 1, 1946 atercolor and ink on board 7/8 x 11³/8 inches aned and dated at lower left



was the American Abstract Artists (AAA), which had formed as an official group in 1936 to exhibit annually. Loew's untitled pink and orange abstraction of 1946 (pl. 2) recalls the work of some of the Abstraction/Creation artists, particularly that of Jean Helion, though it has more cohesion and is less hard-edged than the Frenchman's paintings. But his friendship with de Kooning cannot be ruled out as influence here, particularly in light of the pink, yellow, light blue and green hues, which are present so often in de Kooning's early 1940s paintings, and the biomorphic forms – de Kooning's forte.

A charcoal drawing of 1947 (pl. 8) demonstrates how thoroughly he had absorbed Cubism and its more formalistic progeny in the intervening years. Stately and controlled, things are intimated, but not described, and they shift in space as you scan them, positives becoming negatives, and flipping back. In a few of his Cubist experiments with the figure he departs from distributing its parts in either rectilinear compartments or fitting organic body parts into them. Instead he does something quite unusual – he removes the body's framing

7. **Cubic Still Life No. 1**, 1946 watercolor on paper, $11^{3}/_{4} \times 15^{3}/_{4}$ inches signed at lower right



Michael Loew, 1982 photo J.Kearns

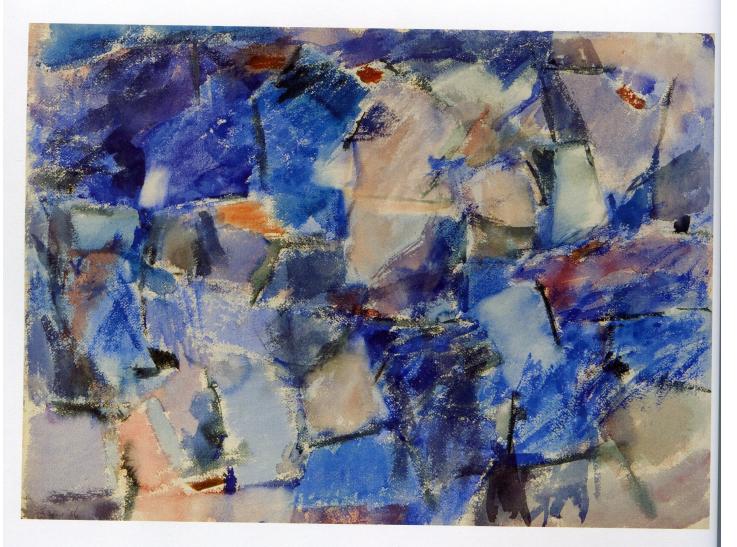
structure and softly, voluptuously shapes the white paper space into curves. Well placed dots are all that are needed to convey the female anatomy in two drawings from 1951 (pls. 12 and 17). It is a way of creating planes by giving hints of the shadows they cast at their edges, the dark space around a side of something, which is a device he will use a great deal later in his Monhegan Island abstractions. A similar thing takes place in an ink drawing of 1948, *B&W* Abstraction (pl. 18), seemingly based on views of his studio, intersperse sharp black linear elements among soft grayish-white planes. Their structures are distant relatives of those he will produce decades later. A group of Monhegan watercolors and ink drawings from 1949 are pivotal for Loew's particular system of abstracting from nature: a blurry, though realistic scene of crashing waves and a large island in the distance; a highly abstract version of the same view with blue interspersed with horizontal indications of land masses and puffy clouds of white with occasional vertical and diagonal markings; and some totally abstract



brushed inks on paper with only one strong horizontal to make the "landscape" amid many separate diverging brushstrokes. Later each element in the scene will receive a directional colored stroke standing for some element in the scene, a rooftop, a mast, the line of a mountain or beach (pls. 19, 20 and 21).

The results of his studies and experiments with pure forms, color, and spatial interplay were first shown in 1949 at the Artist's Gallery in New York, which prompted abstractionists George L.K. Morris and Charmion von Weigand to invite him to join the AAA. He did. He was also invited to join the newly-formed Artist's Club, a fairly informal gathering place on 8th Street in Greenwich Village where artists held panel discussions, watched demonstrations (of Sumi ink painting, for example), heard lectures and talks by artists and, more rarely critics, and generally enjoyed each other's company. Loew, like many of the artists in The Club, was invited, too, to show in the Stable Gallery's Annuals of 1951–1955. Abstract Expressionism was all around him in the 1950s and the excitement it was causing in the artists' studios, their co-op galleries on 10th Street and their

21. **Monhegan, 1949, No. 19**, 1949 India ink on paper, 5 x 6¹/₂ inches signed and dated at lower right



meeting places (by then Cedar Tavern more often than Bickford's Cafeteria) was contagious. Two India inks on paper titled *B&W Lines* of 1956 (pls. 22 and 23) and three watercolors of the same period (pls. 25 - 27) show him loosening the rectilinear grid he'd been working within since the 1950s began. The inks on paper bear comparison with Franz Kline's of the same time frame. And at least one small oil on paper, *Pink Spring*, 1955 (pl.29), is so softly brushed its rectangles and squares look like patches of organic tissue. Whites and light greys overlay the blue, pink, and rose planes producing a luminosity that is not seen again until the 1970s. But in his paintings on canvas, Loew resisted the pull of the painterly as late as 1957. An Untitled canvas of that year (pl.3) with a rectangular schema of a running figure at its center in a field of rectangles is still hard edged, but two oils on paper of 1958 are harbingers of the Michael Loew to come. The red, black and gray painting (pl. 28) has an animalistic ferocity and the other, predominantly orange and green (pl. 30), has the kind of

24. **Transitions in Blue, Monhegan Island** 1956, watercolor on paper 22¹/₄ x 33³/₈ inches signed and dated at lower left



dual vertical masses that will occupy him in the 1960s.3 By 1959 the squares and rectangles are loosely painted colored units of varying sizes with the smaller, more richly colored units gathered across the center. Hofmann is now ascendant; Mondrian tumbling. Loew keeps a tight rein on his material though. You always know what area is the most important, which are lesser. As with a classic Mondrian, you know where you would have to shoot it to kill the picture, they are that hierarchical. And green comes in. Banished by Mondrian, who was said to have even painted the stems of living flowers white to keep the color out of his studio, it comes to life in Loew's paintings of this year. Arcadian (pl. 32), a major painting at almost 70 by 45 inches, is largely comprised of green rectangular patches, the darker ones densely clustered at its center. The lack of perspective and the patches of red and orange, pink and white prevent any illusion of a landscape, even one seen from the air. It is pure abstraction in "impure" hues. Old Gold (pl. 4), also 1959, has importantly placed patches of green in a predominantly warm field of oranges, reds, lavenders, and pinks, some softened by whites.

Though concentrated around the midsection, the 1950s painterly abstractions were comprised of rectangles allover in a vertical format very much akin to the rectilinear charcoal drawings that harked back to Mondrian he was still doing. With a large painting of 1960, *The Beginning* (pl. 43 and cover), that changed – they coalesced into one large mass stitched in place by darting black lines. The space around is undefined, its colors gently shifting from one to another in a welter of brushstrokes. A malestrom of painterly activity went on inside that one massive vaguely rectangular shape, but no specific shaping occurred. Why the rectangle? Loew wrote:

For me the use of the rectangle or square...heightens the intensity of the painting experience. I have no particular "Mystique" of the rectangle: I prefer it as a shape because of its suggestiveness... At the same time I like its dead-pan and ritualistic look, its quiet strength, its illusive neutrality. In its provocative stubbornness it is like a block of marble unwilling to resemble anything but itself.⁵

26. **Monhegan Island**, 1959 watercolor on paper, 15¹/₄ x 22³/₄ inches signed and dated at lower left

27. **Untitled No. 2**, 1959 watercolor on paper, $15^{1/2}$ x $22^{3/4}$ inches signed and dated at lower right



Michael Loew taught at the School of Visual Arts in New York for a large part of his adult life. After the Provincetown years, from the 1940s on, he and his family spent their summers on Monhegan Island off the coast of Maine. One needn't have asked him "Why green?" since he was in it a good part of every year by choice. One painting of 1960 might have prompted that question — I Want You Green (pl. 33), a 75 x 66 inch oil consisting of a green square on a yellow-green rectangle, edged along the right with darker green, all set on a field of light green (top) and golden green (bottom). A great deal of energetic linear activity in black goes on in the central square which feathers off into the field. A few defining lines occur, most importantly a right angle "edge" for the square's upper right corner, a short line indicating the bottom edge of the yellow-green rectangle and another along its top edge. Despite its gestural looseness, the painting is tightly structured.

In 1960 and again in 1966, Loew taught at the University of California, Berkeley. Two 1960 paintings would seem to concern his experience of the light there: Berkeley Blue (pl. 35) and Blues Among Greys (pl. 34). The former is much larger than the other and the brushstrokes are smaller and more active. Blues crisscross over orangey reds nearly extinguishing its fire, which bursts out along the top edge. There is similar action in Blues Among Greys, but the strokes are large and structure a blue barrier⁶ with black bands that locks the reds behind it. This complex rectangle is hemmed in on all sides by lush greys. Two charcoal on paper drawings from 1959 and 1960 (pls. 36 and 37)

28. **Untitled (Red, Black & Gray)**, 1958 oil on paper, 11 x 12³/₄ inches signed and dated verso



represent possible structural precursors for these blue paintings. *Hot Orange* (pl. 38), a third painting of the same year in fiery orange reds, also large at 61 x 76 inches, has an emotional tone that brings up another side of the rectangle's meaning for Loew:

Because the geometric aspect of the rectangle can be both tyrannical and primordial, the problem of reducing the former quality and increasing the latter becomes a challenge... Acting as a façade behind which an immanent intention must be present, where the unknown must ultimately emerge from the recessed layers of the painting's course, it may in turn merge its existence with these primal sources.⁷

29. **Pink Spring**, 1955 oil on board, 21¹/₂ x 25³/₈ inches signed and titled verso

More interaction between the brushstrokes seems characteristic of 1961 paintings to judge by February 1961 (pl. 42) and Green Depths (pl. 40). In the former red, blue, and black jostle with each other within a near square surrounded by light grey whites. It feels like earth, fire, and water in a standoff. Green Depths is even more activated and lively. Red, green, yellow, and black brushstrokes dominate the center, and pinks, blues, and white peek out below and along the top as if they exist on a plane behind the dominant activity. Patches of black mark the edge on either side of the canvas and lines draw rectangles and triangles inside. Loew really liked green and used it often. He once said, "Green is one of those colors that should have been blue."8

Michael Loew firmly believed Hofmann's credo about the importance of both Cubism and Fauvism to Modern Art, that Cubism, being structure, wasn't enough without color. He would compare line to a structure and color to atmosphere, floating through space. "But in oils they are one, doing all things together," he would say. "Every artist wants to simplify his means and put them together."9 In 1963 he painted three canvases, which seem to do that in very different ways each pointing to the future. Big Blue, 1962-1963 (pl. 39), consolidated the blocky rectangle into more of geometrical form, tightens its edges and uses the color as structure. This is particularly noticeable along the bottom where blocky whitened units appear to support the massive square of blue quadrangles. By the next year, 1964, he will be painting completely crisp, hard edges on every shape. January (pl. 41), a black and grey canvas with touches of green is quite a departure. It is limited colors-as-structure, perhaps with a nod to Franz Kline who died the year before. It harks directly back to B&W Lines, 1956, but it also points to the color bands as structure to come. Another small 1963 canvas, Red-Blue Scape (pl. 31), also points both ways: back to the untitled 1958 oil on paper with the two part vertical massings and ahead. Loew had only to tighten up the edges so that the bands are distinct, blow the two units up to fill their sides, and he had the bipartite hard-edged powerhouse paintings of the rest of the 1960s.

33. **I Want You Green**, 1960 oil on canvas, 75¹/₄ x 66 inches, signed at lower right; signed, dated and titled verso exhibited: Stable Gallery, New York



It is interesting to note that Loew remained committed to the study of the nude throughout his career, even while painting large abstract canvases. Seated Black Nude (pl. 44), a boldly brushed ink from 1968 represents a body of densely drawn works on paper from that year. And Seated Nude Collage from 1984 (pl. 45) was created the year before his death and refers back to the intricate collage works of a quarter century earlier, demonstrating that he had lost none of his skill and power.

One final area of prophecy can be seen in the works on paper by hindsight. In 1952 Michael Loew did three 17 by 13 inch pastels in a series titled Space Forms. One senses a progression toward concision and clarity in the series, whatever its size. *Space Forms*, 1952 No.1 (pl. 46) is the softest, sketchiest, most loosely handled of the three, all of which are comprised of squares. Pale blues, yellows, and greens, blushes of pink, orange, and lavender area interspersed between thin black horizontal and vertical touches. *Space Forms*, 1952, No. 3 (pl. 47) is considerably denser, its lines much darker, its activity more complex, and it contains a few diagonals. If both were plans for a house No.3 would have more rooms of varying sizes and lots of closets. *Color Form No*. 26, c.1952 (pl. 48.) is quite different. Firm strokes of color, vertical and horizontal only, are deployed to create optically shifting squares and rectangles evenly over most of the surface. (A small band of blank space is left at the top, a wider one at the bottom.) It appears highly ordered, but as in a fine Cubist painting,

34. **Blues Among Greys**, 1960 oil on canvas, 20 x 24 inches, signed at lower right; signed, dated and titled verso exhibited: Stable Gallery, New York



planes are not locked closed. Instead corners are left open, a side may be missing, so the eye can slip in and out of them as fluidly as moving along a Cubist *passage*. Twenty years from the *Space Forms* series of 1952, Michael Loew will be painting some of the most luminous and satisfying canvases of his life from images in his mind just like these.

April Kingsley

April Kingsley, PhD, is Curator at the Kresge Art Museum in East Lansing, Michigan. She has written extensively on American art and her 1992 book *The Turning Point—The Abstract Expressionists and the Transformation of American Art* is essential reading for any student of the era. She has penned countless catalogs and organized numerous independent exhibitions. Her current project is *American Figurative Expressionism*, a traveling museum show due to premier in late 2009.

36. **Abstraction**, **1959**, No. 9, 1960 charcoal on paper, 18³/₄ x 23³/₄ inches signed and dated at lower right



NOTES

- 1 Sadie A. May was a wealthy, eccentric woman who selected artists she found talented and gave them tickets to travel to Paris and money to live on modestly while there. Besides Loew, there were Alfred Jensen and Max Schnitzler, both budding abstractionists who hated each other. They caused so much trouble for Sadie May that she disbanded the group in 1931, though she continued to support Jensen for many years in New York. During his stay, Loew also painted in the South of France and North Africa, visited Italy and saw relatives in Germany.
- 2 Gertrude Benson, "Art and Social Theories," Creative Art [March 1933], 216. She found the work of Kenneth Hayes Miller's Fourteenth Street School "safe and comfortable" compared to the "vigorously executed conceptions" of Mexicans like José Clemente Orozco, and said that Loew and some others "gave vent to tirades."
- 3 An ink on paper of Two Nudes from 1959 (probably not his only use of the subject) may indicate the source of the abstract dual structure. Both are masses that fill the picture space and have strong uprights on solid bases.
- 4 Abstraction, 1959, No. 1, a horizontal charcoal on paper and a lovely watercolor of Monhegan Island of the same year foretell this development. Abstraction, 1959, No.1 looks like it could have been a study for The Beginning.
- 5 Michael Loew, "Statement." Xerox copy in author's possession given to her by the artist.
- 6 Jack Tworkov was painting his *Barrier* paintings by this time and exhibiting them. He was also close to de Kooning, having a nearby studio.
- 7 Loew "Statement." Which brings in the relevance of Mark Rothko and his dramatic, even tragic intentions for his rectangles. Then too the mushroom cloud of atomic bombs was in the imagination of everyone and found expression in the paintings of more than a few Abstract Expressionists, so it should not be discounted as a possibility here either.
- 8 Remembered from a conversation with the artist.
- 9 Ibid.

37. **Abstraction, 1960**, No. 2, 1960 charcoal on paper, $25^{1/8} \times 18^{3/4}$ inches signed and dated at lower right