The Pure Painterly Allure of Serge Poliakoff—Veiled by American Exceptionalism, Until Now

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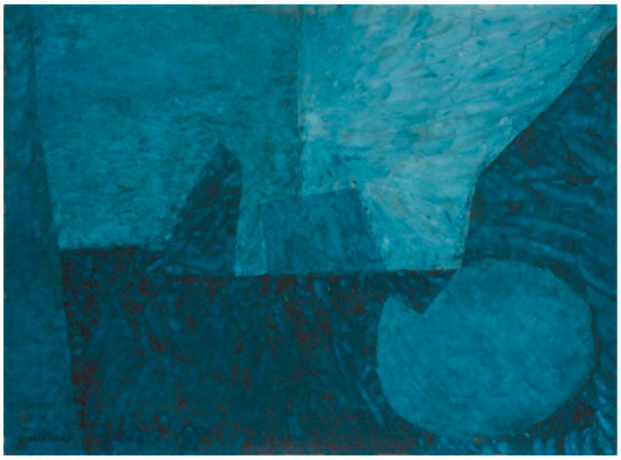

Serge Poliakoff
COMPOSITION EN BLEUE AU CERCLE II, 1955
Cheim & Read

There are numerous theories as to why Serge Poliakoff—a master of pure, unadulterated abstract painting, a celebrity among his peers, and an inspiration to the artists that came after him—has failed to be canonized in the United States. Some chalk up his Stateside lack of fame to a generalized American exceptionalism; after all, he was a Russian-born Parisian. Others think the preciousness of French painting may have proved distasteful during the 1950s and '60s, when Abstract Expressionism and the New York School dominated the art world.

Image courtesy of Cheim & Read.

But on the occasion of the first major U.S. exhibition of Poliakoff's paintings in over 35 years, the critic, curator, and artist Joe Fyfe offers a more nuanced and historically charged view. Even though, as Fyfe is quick to note, art never develops in complete concert with world events, the Paris in which Poliakoff created his best-known paintings was indeed a shattered city. As with the Russian émigré, "there were specific limitations present in the outlook of European artists coming into their own after 1945," Fyfe writes. Americans, triumphant in their global victory, simply created work from a different perspective. And so, to be noticed even by his modern-day countrymen, Poliakoff's legacy required a modest revision of art history.

Serge Poliakoff
COMPOSITION ABSTRAITE , 1961
Cheim & Read

Serge Poliakoff
COMPOSITION ABSTRAITE, 1957
Cheim & Read

The beginning of that process started just three years ago, when the Museum of Modern Art in Paris mounted a major solo exhibition. Poliakoff's works were displayed chronologically, from his earlier figurative paintings to the later abstractions directly inspired by friends Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky, whom he met in 1937.

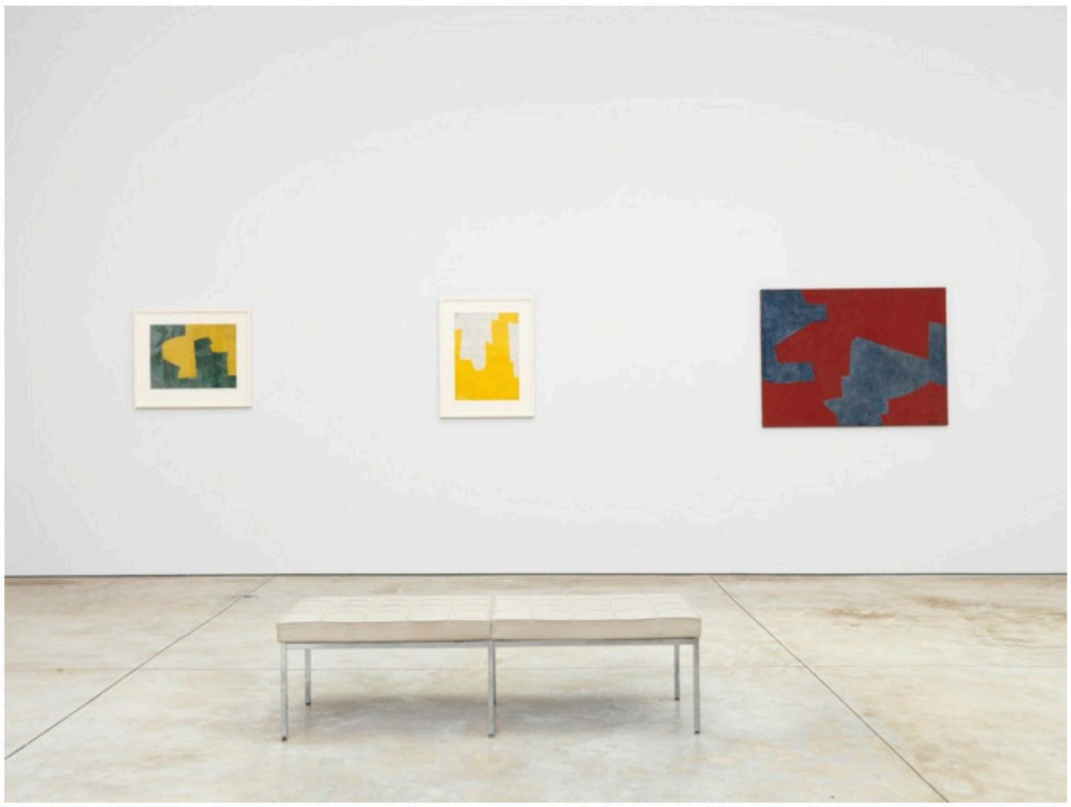

Image courtesy of Cheim & Read.

Poliakoff's reintroduction continues Stateside with the solo exhibition at Cheim & Read in New York, where the painter's perfectly cool, sensitively colored geometric works are available to an American audience for the first time in generations. Many of these paintings were completed as Poliakoff worked as a musician in Parisian nightclubs. He painted without reverence for his own work, and though he obsessed over abstraction, he saw no need to over-intellectualize it, as his contemporaries did. Now, of course, it's easy to see he was one of Europe's premier postwar abstractionists; it's much harder to see why it took this long.

—M. Osberg

"Serge Poliakoff" is on view at Cheim & Read Gallery, New York, Mar. 31–Apr. 30, 2016.