

Athos Zacharias

The Late Work



Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center

1 May – 31 October 2020

Last Man Standing

One of the pleasures of residing on the South Fork is discovering your neighbors—especially when they're living, breathing monuments to a distinguished bygone era. The artist Athanasios (Athos) Zacharias, a longtime resident of Springs who goes by Zack, fits solidly into this category. By most accounts, he is our last link to the Abstract Expressionists; by his own, he's a bridge between them and the next-generation Pop artists.

Zacharias lives in the white elephant of a house he built largely himself, summers and weekends, over a 25-year period. At 92, sharp as a tack, he exercises six mornings a week, paints assiduously, and surfs the web cheerfully on his Mac.

By 1955, after graduating from art school on the G.I. Bill, he had made his way to New York City and landed smack dab in the middle of the art scene—small, intense, and a cauldron of abstraction.

Growing up in the Great Depression, Zacharias had built his own toys, eventually developing carpentry skills that would serve him well as a struggling young artist. Among the modern masters he assisted were Mary Abbott, Grace Hartigan, Lee Krasner, Costantino Nivola, Alfonso Ossorio, Jack Tworkov, and Larry Rivers. "I miss them because they were all older than me and now they're gone," he said wistfully, during a recent studio visit.

It all started one night at the Cedar Tavern in Greenwich Village. As he sipped his 35-cent beer, a charming, somewhat older gentleman with piercing blue eyes began to chat with him. Before leaving to join an insistent group of friends, the man stuck out his hand and said, "By the way, my name is Bill de Kooning." As Zack would recall years later, "I went home, a few blocks away on Broadway and told my wife,

'Mary, I just met one of the greatest painters in the world and he's a regular guy.'"

De Kooning was 23 years Zacharias's senior but his wife, Elaine, was just nine years older. Zacharias was invited by de Kooning to join "the Artists Club," a regular discussion group that met in secret. "We'd spend all night trying to understand a word like intuition in painting," Zacharias recalls. "Sometimes it would almost end in fistfights. There were only about four hundred people in the whole art world, and pretty soon I knew them all."

In the mid-1950s, Zacharias bought a small plot on Copeces Lane in Springs—then a dirt road—and built a summer cottage, later acquiring the adjacent acre (for \$5,000) and erecting a larger house for his family. Back in the city, he stretched extra-large canvases for Hartigan and others. Out east, he installed mosquito netting in the critic Harold Rosenberg's writing shed, rebuilt the skylight in Rivers's Southampton shed, and scoured various beaches, collecting sands of different colors for Nivola's installations. He became Elaine de Kooning's perpetual sidekick and chief assistant. "Everything seemed to happen around her and because of her," he recalls.



Zacharias in his Copeces Lane studio, 1978.
Photograph © Estate of Hans Namuth.

John Cage and his partner, the choreographer Merce Cunningham, lived in the ground-floor apartment of a townhouse on Bank Street owned by Rose Slivka—another East Ender, an art critic and friend of Elaine de Kooning’s—and Zacharias was dispatched to build them a studio. When Cage wanted a glass composing table lit from beneath, Zack took on the project: “I went down to the sub-basement and found four chunky wooden legs. About ten years later, Rose screamed at me in the middle of Three Mile Harbor Road that I had no business using her legs for John’s table.”

At Ossorio’s 58-acre Georgica Pond estate, The Creeks, Zacharias converted an attic servants’ quarters into a gallery. An heir to his father’s Domino Sugar fortune and a renowned artist in his own right, Ossorio collected Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock, and others. After Pollock died in a car crash on Springs-Fireplace Road in August of 1956, Zack met his widow, Lee Krasner, at a dinner party hosted by Ossorio and began assisting her.

“She was very demanding, a perfectionist,” Zacharias recalls. Exhibiting no fear of the edge, she often left Zack a scant inch for stretching the canvases: “When she finished a painting, we would take it down to the floor. That was when the problems would begin.”

There were memorable evenings at de Kooning’s house on Accabonac Road and elsewhere. For one occasion, Zacharias hung a

World War II parachute in the backyard and set up his hi-fi for dancing in the barn: “Bill gave me \$5 and said, ‘Go buy some Frank Sinatra records.’” The architect Frederick Kiesler, who designed the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem, declared it the best party ever: “He raved for years about ‘that erotic parachute.’”

When Barney Rosset, the once-notorious Grove Press publisher, threw a launch party for his housing development, Hampton Waters, Zach recalls, “There was a plywood bridge that led to a small island where Larry Rivers and his band were playing. The bridge broke and I pulled Eleanor Ward [a gallerist] out of the water. Mike Goldberg, Frank O’Hara, and Grace Hartigan went skinny-dipping. I certainly thought Grace was the most beautiful of that trio.”

If Zacharias’s own painting career has been an endless tug of war between Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, he’s come to a relatively recent—and inspiring—reconciliation: “What a dilemma. For years, I was trying to find a solution. It wasn’t until I accidentally saw *The Simpsons* on TV and noticed all their outrageous colors. I thought if I could put these strange color relationships together and paint an abstraction, then maybe I had it. It happened about a year ago. I think I’m doing some of my best work now.”

—David Gibbons, *EAST* magazine, 2019

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Sincere thanks to Rena and Denis Zacharias for their generous cooperation. The exhibition and brochure are made possible by contributions from our members and the Pollock-Krasner Endowment Fund.

On the cover: Zacharias in his studio, 2018. Photograph by Adam Weiss for LI Pulse.

ATHOS ZACHARIAS

A biographical summary

Athanasios Zacharias was born on 17 June 1927 in Marlborough, Massachusetts, and raised in Fall River. During World War II, too young to serve in the military, he joined the Merchant Marines and served on a tanker in the Pacific. As the war ended, he was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps and worked as a statistical draftsman. After the war, he studied art on the G.I. Bill at the Rhode Island School of Design, receiving a BFA in 1952. That summer he studied at the Art Students League in Woodstock, New York. He received his MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1953.

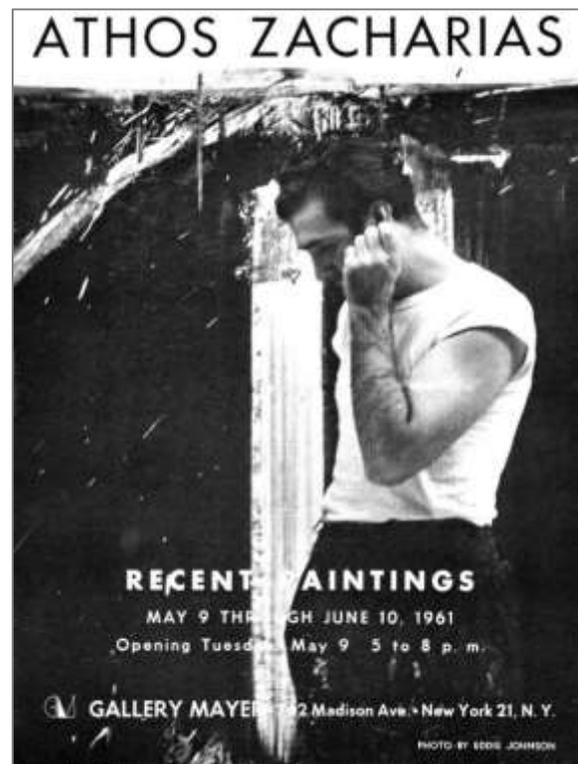
Zacharias moved to New York City in the mid-1950s and joined the March Gallery, one of the Tenth Street co-ops, where he had his first exhibition in 1959, when he was also represented in group shows in Houston and Tokyo. On the recommendation of Larry Rivers, his work was included in Art:USA:59, organized by gallerist Lee Nordness, at the New York Coliseum. Two years earlier, he had purchased property on Copeces Lane in Springs and spent the next five years building a house there. In 1960 he bought land next door, where he built a second home and studio.

His first solo exhibition on the East End was at Robert Keene's bookstore and gallery in Southampton in 1961, when his work received the first of two best-in-show awards in the annual members' exhibition at Guild Hall (the second was in 1979). He continued to exhibit in solo and group exhibitions in New York City and the Hamptons throughout the next five decades. In addition to solo exhibitions in Chicago (1961), Amsterdam (1986-87 and 1991), and Tampa (1988), his work was included in group exhibitions in San Francisco (1960), Stockbridge, Massachusetts (1971), Nottingham, England (1973), Amsterdam (1986 and 1996) and Rotterdam (1988). He designed décor for the

Manhattan Festival of Dance in 1963 and created projections for Edith Stephen's Electric Currents Dance Company in 1969.

From 1967 to 1988, Zacharias taught art at Wagner College on Staten Island. He also taught at Brown University, Parsons School of Design, and SUNY New Paltz. He received grants from the Longview Foundation in 1962 and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in 2007. His work is in the collections of the Museum of Art, Providence; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; the Kalamazoo Institute of Art; the Phoenix Museum of Art; the Butler Art Institute, Youngstown; the Corcoran Gallery of Art (now at the American University Museum); and Guild Hall Museum, as well as corporate and private collections.

Athos Zacharias died of kidney failure on 18 August 2019, at age 92.



CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

All works are lent by the Estate of Athos Zacharias

1 *Aloha*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 46 x 40 inches

2 *Jewel*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 46 x 40 inches

3 *Spring 1*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 46 x 40 inches

4 *Tangle*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 36 x 30 inches

5 *Hairdo*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches

6 *Owl*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches

7 *Fez*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 inches

8 *Balaban*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

9 *Poseidon*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

10 *Cap*, 2018
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

11 *Brimstone*, 2019
Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 inches

12 *Clown*, 2019
Oil on canvas, 20 x 16 inches



8 *Balaban*, 2018



9 *Poseidon*, 2018



I Aloha, 2018