

Manhattan Arts

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L



Wassily Kandinsky, *Composition VII*, 1913, oil on canvas, 6'6-3/4" x 11'1/8". ©1994 Museum of Modern Art

WASSILY KANDINSKY: "Compositions" at MoMA
ALLAN STONE: New York Dealer Ahead of the Curve
STUART SHEDLETSKY: Curator of "Still Working"
JACOB LAWRENCE: Master Storyteller



ARTISTS IN THE 1990s: NIKOLAI BRAGINE • ROB BRENNAN • CARMIE CASTELLANO-GOWEN
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Allan Stone

Ahead of The Curve

By Donna Cameron

In the early 1960s, **Allan Stone** risked everything, including a promising law career, to open an art gallery and launch the careers of then unknown artists Richard Estes, Eva Hess, Robert Ryman, Wayne Thiebaud, and others.

As he settles into an armchair in the office of his new gallery at 113 East 90 Street, he is surrounded by a collective variety of contemporary paintings and sculpture, and accumulations of primitive art. In this room he relates tale after tale of the initiation and rise of some of the most significant post-war American artists.

"It's all about vibrations, the vibrations I sense when I see a truly great work of art," he says. "To me, the real-thing gives off the right energy. I trust my gut sense and intuitive instinct for people. For example, when I discovered Richard Estes, he was a bartender at a party I attended. A waiter, passing hors d'oeuvres said to me, 'There's someone here who's bartending, who's a great painter, and he's too shy to approach you to look at his work...'" Stone went over to the young bartender and introduced himself, and based on a "feeling", made an appointment to see Estes's work. "Estes's early style was much more painterly, almost soft, like early American Impressionist painting," Stone says, "not the hard-edged photo-realist style to which it has evolved." Still Stone sensed something "right" about Estes. "He was a gentle man—very thoughtful, very quiet," Stone says.

Similarly, one day in 1961, Stone's gallery was the last stop for a young, portfolio trudging and very discouraged Wayne Thiebaud. Stone's was the northern most gallery on Manhattan's Upper Eastside then, as it is now. "Out of the bustle of Madison Avenue, he appeared at my door," Stone says, adding, "I was struck by his human quality..." The two had dinner at Embers, while Erroll Garner played the piano, and they began a friendship which has continued to this day.

Stone, an ex-painter himself, approaches the business of art dealing much as a master painter approaches a canvas. "I get an idea. I don't always know why or where it comes from. I only know that it's the right thing for me to do." Looking back, the *right* thing for Allan Stone has almost always been ahead of the curve.

Stone, whose father was a lawyer, attended Harvard undergraduate school where he majored in government and political science. He then graduated with honors from Boston University Law School in 1957, and went on to work as an attorney, first in Washington with the Department of Justice in the Civil Fraud Division, and later as an associate with the New York firm of Wicks, Rydell, Bloomer, Jacobi and McGuire. During that period he befriended Ivan Karp, now owner of the O.K. Harris Gallery in SoHo and formerly director of the Leo Castelli gallery, and Dick Bellamy, now owner of the Oil and Steel Gallery.

After work hours, the threesome went to meet young artists and learn about their ideas and new work. In October, 1960, The Chase Manhattan Bank commissioned the three young entrepreneurs to curate a show of new works by new talents for a purchasing committee of David Rockefeller, Dorothy Miller and Ward Bennet for their new building at One Chase Plaza, in downtown Manhattan. The show was held in the Dain-Schiff Showroom uptown on Madison Avenue. It was a success. "They bought 22 paintings from us," Stone recalls.



PHOTO CREDIT: DONNA CAMERON

Allan Stone in his gallery at 113 East 90 Street.

Stone's life was changed forever. A month later he walked into his boss's office in the law firm and told him he was leaving to open an art gallery. Several weeks before, while returning from a lunch hour visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stone noticed an open door at 81 East 82 Street. He entered the building and found himself in a long hall with a black and white marble floor, at the end of which was an alluring room. "I thought, 'what an interesting place to open an art gallery'," He says. He opened the gallery on Pearl Harbor Day, December 7, 1960. Stone recalls the solemn way in which people then observed the anniversary of Pearl Harbor and how few showed up at the opening.

"The art business was tough then because *there was no art business*," Stone emphasizes. "And we were always broke. We could barely make the \$300 monthly rent." After landlord troubles, Stone relocated in 1962 to 48 East 86th Street, where he remained for the next 30 years.

"Then, the bottom line was an aesthetic and intellectual pursuit, and now the bottom line is business," he says disapprovingly. "Business is important, but in the art business, it's not the bottom line... I remember a meeting called by Resnick and Rosenquist of the Tenth Street School. The topic was corruption and mendacity in the art world which then basically meant that you sold a painting. Resnick was reprimanding Rosenquist for selling a painting."

Stone's current gallery space at 113 East 90 Street was built as a firehouse in 1876 by the Fire Underwriter's Association. The two-story, red-brick structure stands as proof that Stone now, as then, knows a good gallery space when he sees one. The exhibit area includes a sculpture garden, and a smaller building in back which is being used as a Primitive Art Museum, to show rotating exhibits from Stone's extraordinary primitive art collection. Stone opened this new space with a Wayne Thiebaud retrospective, "Celebrating 33 years together," he says, with a smile.

Through January, the gallery presented a much lauded show of Willem de Kooning's paintings, "Liquifying Cubism", which Stone curated and hung himself. The show has been highly praised by painter Jasper Johns, and recommended by curator David Sylvester of the Tate Gallery in London. Sylvester was one of the curators of the currently internationally traveling de Kooning show which opened at the National Galleries in Washington last year, and recently left the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York for the Tate Gallery on London. Aggie Gund, Director of the Museum of Modern Art said to Stone, "This is the best show in New York in 15 years."

The de Kooning show at the gallery has been viewed as unusual for its unique depth and insight into what Stone calls "the evolution of de Kooning from figurative painting to biomorphic abstraction and then into the liquification of Cubism."

The gallery's future exhibition schedule includes annual one-person shows of major artists whom Stone previously exhibited, and may include the works of major New York Abstract Expressionist artists such as Arshille Gorky, John Graham and Joseph Cornell. Stone is considered one of the world's foremost experts on the subject of The New York School of Abstract Expressionism.

Primarily, Stone is dedicated to supporting new talent. Through March 11, he is presenting artist Mundy Hepburn with his first one-person show in New York. Entitled "Gas 'n Glass," the show features Hepburn's ingenious glass sculpture which he fills with various gases to create three-dimensional objects. True to form, Stone met Hepburn by chance, during a visit to painter Joan Levy's studio. "It's a dream," he says, to stumble into a studio and experience something wondrous." Also planned are a two-person show featuring paintings by Robert Baribeau and sculpture

by Diana Moore and a solo exhibit of paintings by Lorraine Shemesh. A "New Talent Show" is planned for June through July. Stone began collecting new talent's work art in 1950, when as a Harvard freshman, he purchased Study for a Pink Angel by the then unknown artist Willem de Kooning for \$200. This upcoming "New Talent Show" should be worth seeing.

The art community will witness many more contributions from Allan Stone, as he continues the path he was destined to follow. "Two years ago I had a heart attack and literally died and came back," Stone says. "But it wasn't my time, I had to come back. Life has to be lived." Stone, going strong at 62, when outside of the gallery, plays tennis, restores antique cars, and loves gardening and trout fishing. He is the proud father of six daughters.

Donna Cameron is a New York-based artist and writer. Her films and videos are in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art and distributed by the MoMA's Film and Video Library. An exhibition of her work is currently featured at the Gulf and Western Gallery.

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