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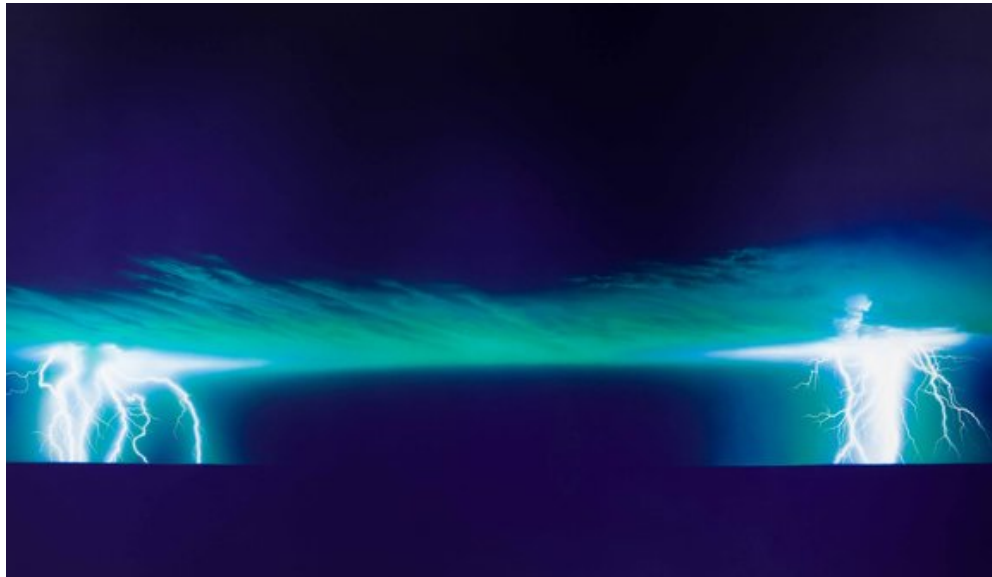
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The New York Times

An Artist With an Ever-Increasing Desire to Disappear to Disappear

'Jack Goldstein x 10,000' at the Jewish Museum



Jack Goldstein x 10,000, the artist's first American retrospective, now at the Jewish Museum, includes this untitled 1983 painting.

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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“Jack Goldstein x 10,000,” the first American museum retrospective of this brilliant but elusive artist, is both a celebration and a cautionary tale. It revels in Goldstein’s posthumous influence as it reveals the tragic disconnect of his life and his art, the desire to disappear complicated by an intense careerist drive. For his master’s thesis exhibition, he had himself buried in a wooden box fitted with a breathing tube; above ground, a blinking red light reassured the audience that he was still alive.

Working in both Los Angeles and New York, in film and in painting, Goldstein connected some disparate corners of the art world — not just movements, like Pop and Minimalism, but competing models of artistic success. Trained at the California Institute of the Arts under John Baldessari in the 1970s, he moved from an anti-materialistic campus scene of performance and body art to the market- and media-savvy hothouse of 1980s New York.

There, Goldstein became part of the Pictures movement, centered on Artists Space, alongside Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, who went on to become art stars, while his career foundered. They have had their museum retrospectives, splashy affairs at MoMA and the Guggenheim; Goldstein’s almost didn’t happen at all.

The show was originally scheduled for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles but was canceled in 2010 by its new director, Jeffrey Deitch. The Orange County Museum of Art came to the rescue and has now passed on a smaller, essentialized version of the exhibition, at the urging of the Jewish Museum’s director, Claudia Gould. New York is lucky to have it.

The curator Philipp Kaiser, working with the Jewish Museum’s assistant curator Joanna Montoya, neatly navigates some tricky passages in Goldstein’s career; at the time of his suicide in 2003, at the age of 57, he was just starting to re-emerge after a decade-long, drug-addled absence, during which he lived in a trailer in East Los Angeles and produced no art, aside from cryptic concrete poems and an “autobiography” consisting entirely of quotations from philosophy books.

That period followed an abrupt turn from film to painting, one that’s smoothed over here by a portrait of the artist as director and producer. (He had assistants execute his photo-based paintings with airbrushes, just as he had engaged Hollywood specialists in the making of his films.)

As expected, the films overshadow the work in other mediums (paintings, writings, sound recordings and the odd sculpture). Some of the later films have appeared in recent New York gallery shows, but this exhibition offers a rare look at the early, performance-based ones: works like “Milk,” in which the persistent banging of a fist on a table finally topples a glass, or “Spotlight,” in which a beam chases Goldstein around an empty room.

Yoking Romantic ideas about disappearance and inevitability to the more programmatic actions of Conceptualism, these works have much in common with the films of Ger Van Elk and Bas Jan Ader (Dutch transplants who were active in Goldstein’s California circle).

By the mid-’70s, Goldstein had stopped appearing in his films and performances. Hiring actors, stuntmen and light and sound technicians from the film industry, he staged events that were meant to be “felt ambiguously both as ‘real’ and as a ‘cinematic’ illusion,” as he wrote of a set piece called “Burning Window.”

That same uncertainty haunts the masterly concise color films he made later in that decade, which have been a huge and often unacknowledged source of inspiration for young artists working today. (The photographer and filmmaker Elad Lassry, for instance, owes much to Goldstein’s vintage-Hollywood aesthetic and uncanny use of props.)

Nine of these films are shown, with a total running time of just 23 minutes. They include the well-known “Metro-Goldwyn Mayer,” a loop of the film studio’s roaring lion mascot, and “Shane,” named for the trained German Shepherd that barks in response to inaudible commands from someone behind the camera.

Here, too, are little imagist poems, in which colored lights flicker across a knife or the foot of a ballet dancer on point slowly descends to the floor. They are just as memorable as the animal works and are also, in a way, about memory and discipline.

Moving from the films to the paintings feels jarring, perhaps appropriately so. Goldstein himself was quite candid about the shift; in an interview in 2001, he recalled 1979 as a pivotal year.

“The alternative spaces were over, and galleries were coming in,” he said. “I had to make paintings quick, ’cause the writing was on the wall.” His paintings are most valuable as an object lesson for young artists: Don’t change course because of the market.

These large-scale depictions of meteor showers, bombing raids and lightning strikes feel

more cynical than their sinister, shock-and-awe subject matter would suggest; they seem to be trying to produce a sort of conditioned response from the viewer, like the bark of the German Shepherd. At best, they have a sort of kooky, sci-fi appeal; at worst, they remind you of recent paintings by Damien Hirst.

And installing them in clean white galleries does them no favors; a recent show at the gallery *Venus Over Manhattan*, by contrast, played up the staginess of Goldstein's paintings with low lights and a Patsy Cline soundtrack — ultimately steering the conversation back to film.

By the time we reach the gallery devoted to Goldstein's text-based art, his muddled and impenetrable adventures in word processing, we are a long way from those brilliant films. All 17 volumes of the "Selected Writings," which consist entirely of cut-and-pasted quotations from philosophy books, are displayed without much commentary; that's been relegated to the catalog, where an incisive and sad essay by John Kelsey describes these texts as "the autobiography of a disappearing artist and the final means by which he controls and completes this act."

The show has an alternate ending, a more uplifting one: Goldstein's last film, "Underwater Sea Fantasy," a compilation of science-film footage showing aquatic life and exploding volcanoes. It plays alongside photographs of Goldstein and his work space by James Welling, taken in the 1970s when those two artists shared a studio building.

Taking the full measure of Goldstein's career, however, means eventually coming face to face with the dark, druggie, viciously competitive side of 1980s art stardom — something we're more accustomed to seeing in the stories of expressive painters like Basquiat. The cool, cerebral, hands-off stance of the Pictures movement, it turns out, could cover up a world of pain.