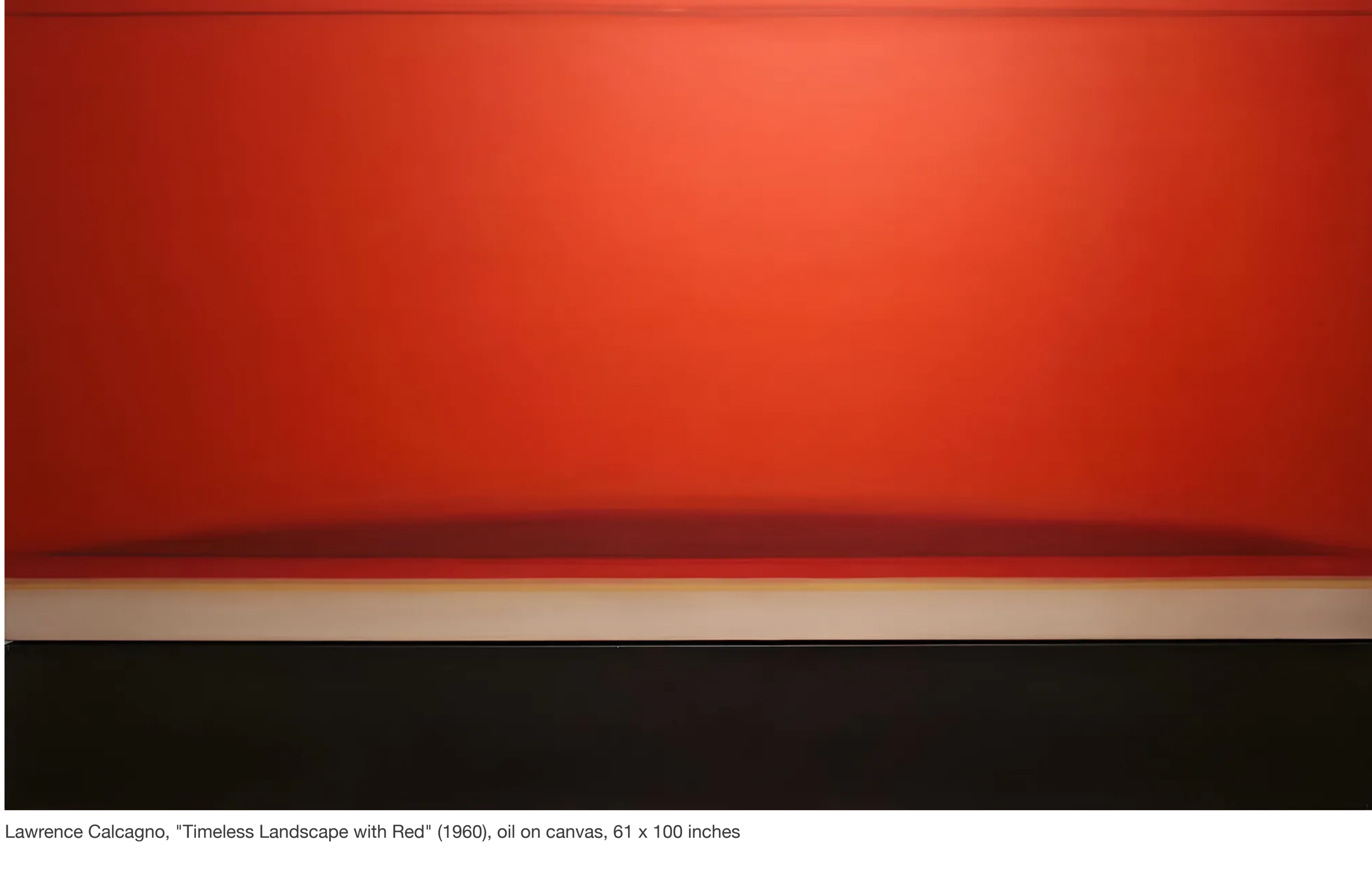


Art

The Gay Abstract Expressionist Largely Lost to History

Lawrence Calcagno showed in nine Whitney biennials and was a lover to Beauford Delaney, but his legacy is yet to be fully explored.

Michael Klein June 30, 2024



Lawrence Calcagno, "Timeless Landscape with Red" (1960), oil on canvas, 61 x 100 inches

We rely on readers like you to fund our journalism. If you value our coverage and want to support more of it, consider supporting us as a member. [Join Us](#)

Although frequently introduced as a student of Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still, abstract expressionist painter Lawrence Calcagno was his own master. He was gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal in the United States, not to mention socially taboo. But he managed to achieve career success despite those prejudices, holding his first solo show in 1955 at the Martha Jackson Gallery. Jackson, a champion of avant-garde art, had famously shown works from Willem de Kooning's *Woman* (1950–53) series earlier that year. Calcagno's show was similarly a hit, capturing the attention of *Time Magazine*, which noted that the San Francisco native's paintings were "saturated with rich California earth tones and the shifting, fog-ridden horizons of the Pacific Coast."



Martha Jackson Gallery (1961) (photo by Robert M. McElroy, courtesy Amar Gallery)

Calcagno's career blossomed from this first exhibition: He would go on to hold a total of 80 solo shows throughout his career, and was included in nine Whitney Biennials (then, the Whitney Annual) in a two-decade span. Yet he went from blue-chip exhibitions and international shows in Paris, London, Copenhagen, and Mexico City down to somewhat unknown status in the years to follow. The Whitney, for example, owns five paintings and watercolors by Calcagno, but last showed them in 1970. Indeed, without the efforts of critics and curators Lawrence Alloway and Gerald Nordland, Calcagno's legacy as a visionary abstractionist might be even further lost to history.

Now is the time to revisit the artist, who was grouped in with abstract expressionism and then largely left off its ledgers, but who in reality developed his own network across an itinerant life. In 1955, *Time* quoted Calcagno on his European influences, or lack thereof: "With the death of Matisse, the great, great tradition of French painting is about worked out." He added: "There are still major figures like Picasso and Braque, but they are no longer dealing with the immediate thing. The younger painters are seeking a way out. Some of them think we've got it." What Calcagno and his contemporaries "got" was the abstraction of the day: painterly, expressive, and drawn from the unconscious.

Subscribe to our newsletter

Get the latest art news, reviews and opinions from Hyperallergic.

Daily
The latest stories every weekday morning

Weekly
Editors' picks of the best stories each week

Opportunities
Monthly list of opportunities for artists, and art workers

Email Address

[View our full list of free newsletters.](#)

Calcagno adapted what he learned from his schooling at the California School of Fine Arts in San Francisco into a personal style in which bands of distilled bold color recalling horizons cohere into dynamic landscapes filled with reductive brushwork, suggesting the breadth of nature as witnessed at different times of day. Each canvas presents a strong sense of place and time: an image of the ocean amid a storm, a battle between deep blue and black, as in "Pacifica II" (1971); a cross-section of earth, as in the unbroken red and ochre expanses at the far edges of "Sapaque II" (1955), which coalesce into a jumble of jagged, dark strokes at the center. The spirit of these works might have roots in the tutelage of Rothko and Still, but should also be read in the context of his European contemporaries.



Lawrence Calcagno, "Sapaque II" (1955), oil on canvas, 46 x 44 inches

European masters like Braque and Picasso might've not held much sway over Calcagno, but Europe called because of its relatively tolerant view on homosexuality in the 1950s and '60s, wherein it was permitted as long as it was in private and out of view. There, he found his peers: On a visit to Paris, he met the painter Beauford Delaney, and the two would spend two years as a couple frequenting museums and cafes. This relationship brought Calcagno in contact with writers James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, friends of Delaney who had come to the French capital to escape racism in the United States and find greater freedom for themselves and their work.

Delaney and Calcagno in particular grew to share a close artistic bond, tied by their shared belief in the spiritual nature of painting and abstraction, and remained close after Calcagno returned to the US. The two exchanged hundreds of letters in Delaney's later years. These correspondences were vulnerable and open, the prose verging on the spiritual. In 1959, Delaney wrote: "Dear Larry, your wonderful informative letter arrived today like a celestial sentinel. I had walked into Paris this morning... and here was your letter... It almost made me weak."

Calcagno's relationship with Delaney is but one of the many avenues to reading his body of work that have yet to be fully traversed. "Painting was the one avenue through which I could find psychical tolerance and be released," he once wrote, as quoted in Marika Herskovic's *American Abstract Expressionism of the 1950s: An Illustrated Survey With Artists' Statements, Artworks and Biographies*. "My life has always been motivated not by intellectual or rational considerations but more by a subjective compulsion, by what I love."

We hope you enjoyed this article! Before you keep reading, we wanted to ask if you would consider supporting *Hyperallergic's* journalism during a time when independent, critical reporting is increasingly scarce.

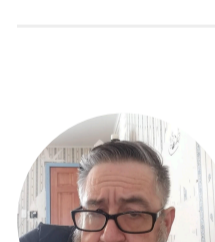
Unlike many in the art world, we are not beholden to large corporations or billionaire board members. Our journalism is funded by readers like you, ensuring integrity and independence in our coverage. We strive to offer trustworthy perspectives on everything from art history to contemporary art, spotlight artist-led social movements, uncover overlooked stories, and challenge established norms to make art more inclusive and accessible. With your support, we can continue to provide global coverage without the elitism often found in art journalism.

If you can, please consider joining our paid membership program. Millions rely on *Hyperallergic* for free, reliable information. By becoming a member, you help keep our journalism independent and accessible to all. Thank you for reading.

[Become a member](#)

[Share](#) [Mail](#) [Bluesky](#) [Threads](#) [LinkedIn](#) [Facebook](#)

Tagged: [Abstract Expressionism](#) [Art History](#) [LGBTQ](#)



Michael Klein
Michael Klein is a writer, private dealer, and freelance and independent curator. He served as the first in-house curator for the Microsoft Art Collection based in Redmond, Washington between 1999 and... [More by Michael Klein](#)

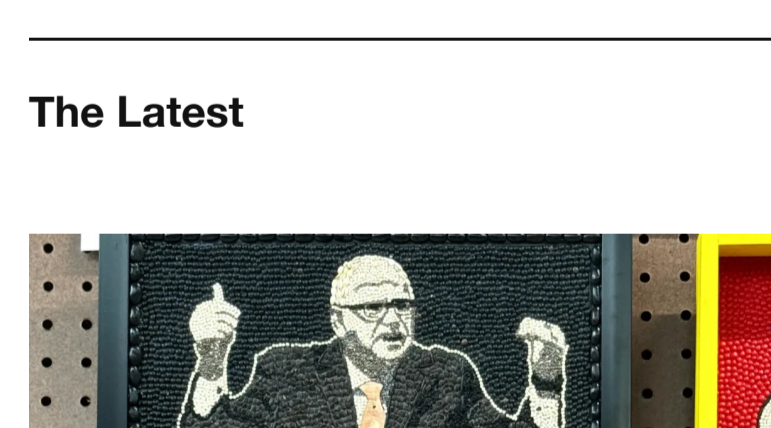
Join the Conversation 2 Comments

Expand comments

Most Popular

- [The Six Wives of Henry VIII Get Their Due](#)
- [An Art Exhibition That Makes Rejection Look Good](#)
- [Child Shatters 3,500-Year-Old Vase at Israeli Museum](#)
- [A View From the Easel](#)
- [Required Reading](#)

The Latest



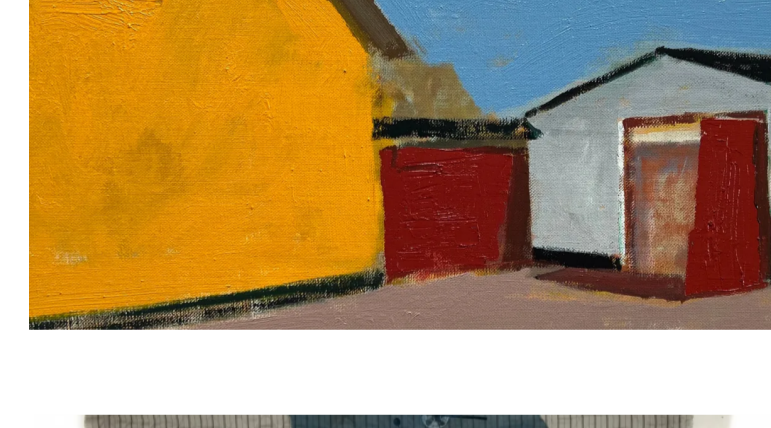
Wall-to-Wall Walz at the Minnesota State Fair Seed Art Show
Local artists get political in painstakingly crafted mosaics at the only state fair crop art display in the United States.
[Isabella Segalovich](#)



Required Reading
This week: diving into the Black Atlantic, Percival Everett's *James*, "demure" by and for trans people, debunking the "marshmallow test," and much more.
[Lakshmi Rivera Amin](#)



Sponsored
Mitchell Johnson Exhibits Small, Scenic Landscapes in *Where The Colors Are*
Paintings from New England, Europe, New York, Newfoundland, and California are on view September 4–15 at Truro Center for the Arts in Cape Cod, Massachusetts.



What to Do When Your National Flag Doesn't Represent You?
Though she belongs to a movement of young artists exploring recent upheavals in Sri Lanka, Hema Shironi's works also draw upon her experience as a mixed-identity artist.
[Pranodha Weerasekera](#)



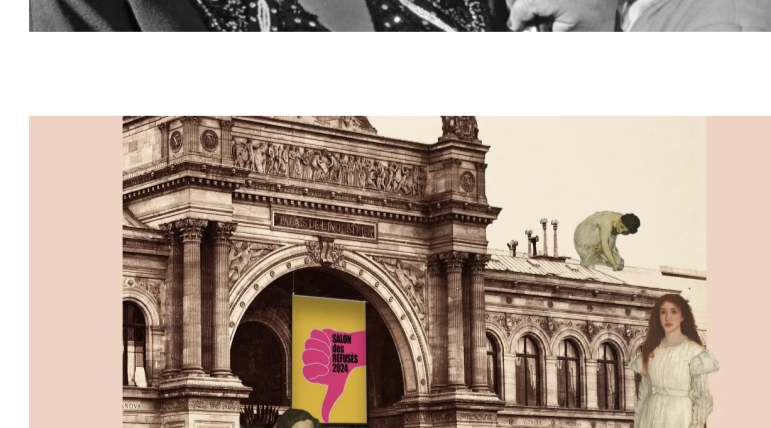
A View From the Easel
"I consider the studio to be a co-creator of my work, and the container for my actions."
[Lakshmi Rivera Amin](#)



Sponsored
The National Arts Club Presents *Jazz Greats*
"Jazz Greats | Classic Photographs from the Bank of America Collection" is on view at the historic NYC club from September 5 to November 27.



An Art Exhibition That Makes Rejection Look Good
The Brooklyn Waterfront Artists Coalition is preparing to proudly display works that didn't make it into a popular open-call show at the Brooklyn Museum.
[Valentina Di Liscia](#)



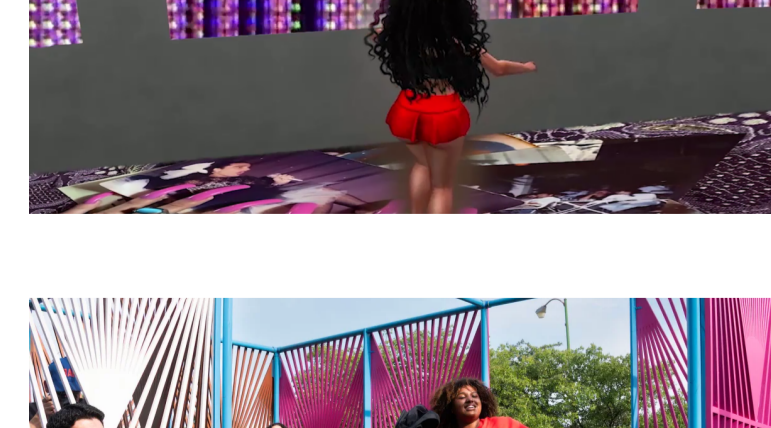
Child Shatters 3,500-Year-Old Vase at Israeli Museum
The "priceless" vessel was originally found in a tomb at Ein Samiya in the Occupied West Bank.
[Ihaa Farfan](#)



Sponsored
This Summer, *TONO x PAMMTV Selects* Dives Into Shapeshifting Video Art
The streaming exhibition from Pérez Art Museum Miami is co-curated with TONO, a new festival for video, performance art, and music in Mexico City.



New Three-Year Arts Series Will Center NYC's Latine Community
Historias aims to provide a more comprehensive and intersectional view of a steadily growing and diversifying population.
[Maya Pontone](#)



A Truck Exhibition on Bodily Autonomy Is Traveling Cross-Country
Body Freedom For Every(Body), a rotating art show, will make stops in 15 cities this fall.
[Maya Pontone](#)

ADVERTISEMENT