

The Armory Show: *Approaching Abstraction*

Booth 308, Javits Center, 9–11 September 2022

(Preview 8 September 2022)



Milton Avery
Yacht Race in Fog, 1959
Oil on canvas
127 x 182.9 cm
50 x 72 in

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Courtesy The Milton Avery Trust and Victoria Miro

Victoria Miro is delighted to participate in The Armory Show (Booth 308) with works by Milton Avery, Idris Khan, Yayoi Kusama, Sarah Sze and Flora Yukhnovich. Titled *Approaching Abstraction*, the presentation considers the boundaries between figuration and abstraction, and the ways in which meaning flows back and forth between shared languages of colour, gesture and form.

One of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, **Milton Avery** (1885–1965) is celebrated for his luminous paintings of landscapes, figures and still lifes, which balance distillation of form with free, vigorous brushwork and lyrical colour. With his focus on simplified forms and use of colour as a primary means of expression, Avery profoundly influenced and won the devotion of fellow artists including the Abstract Expressionists Mark Rothko, Adolph Gottlieb and Barnett Newman. However, while seeking to express an idea in its simplest form, Avery never sought pure abstraction for himself. Above all, he is an artist who resists categorisation. ‘I never have any rules to follow,’ he stated in 1952, ‘I follow myself.’ Works on view include the masterwork *Yacht Race in Fog*, 1959, which was completed during a period in which Avery, Rothko and Gottlieb, rekindling a friendship that began in the 1930s, summered together in Provincetown, on Cape Cod. During this time, Avery started to paint on an ever-larger scale, further refining his visual vocabulary while pushing his imagery to the edge of abstraction. This new pictorial realm reaches its zenith in *Yacht Race in Fog*, which depicts sailboats emerging from a field of candescent colour as through a dense haze. An insight into Avery’s working practice is revealed in the rarely-seen pairing of *Yacht Race in Fog* with the closely associated watercolour on paper *Sails in Fog*, 1959, which shows his consistency with materials and his development of motif, atmosphere and theme.

The retrospective *Milton Avery: American Colourist* is on view at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, until 16 October 2022.

Idris Khan has often drawn inspiration from key philosophical and theological texts in his work, yet increasingly his own writings have become a conduit for investigating memory, creativity and the layering of experience. These texts, once repeated and layered, are distilled, a number of fragmentary experiences and disparate ideas becoming a single image. In this way, while Khan ultimately eradicates the meaning of the original text, he constructs an abstract and universal language. Works such as the painting *A Day Like This*, 2015, are gradually built up with strands of text applied on top of one another. The results are intensely dark with a dense radial constellation of words creating an image that suggests a contained energy emanating from a central point. Also on view are a number of *Rhythm Painting* works, in which sheet music is taken as a starting point. Sharply masking out areas of musical notation with passages of gestural blue oil stick, in these works Khan leaves visible only selected elements of the original manuscript. If music can be thought of sound organised into time, and musical notation a further attempt to schematise the ephemeral, Khan here speaks eloquently of the essential duality between music as rational, written form and unquantifiable experience, at the same time creating new compositions with their own internal rhythms and expressiveness. For the artist, the significance of the colour blue lies in how ‘it can have an immediate effect on emotion. I think it can have a positive or negative effect on the eye.’

Works by the artist feature in a solo exhibition on the theme of nature and the cycle of the seasons at Château La Coste, Provence, until 18 September 2022.

Throughout her career, **Yayoi Kusama** has developed a unique and diverse body of work that, highly personal in nature, connects profoundly with global audiences. *INFINITY-NETS [ANBT]*, 2014, is an iconic example of Kusama’s white *Infinity Net* paintings. Forging a path between Abstract Expressionism, then the dominant style, and the nascent Minimalist movement, Kusama first showed her *Infinity Nets* in New York in the late 1950s, to great critical acclaim. In these works, Kusama responded to the bravado of Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, redefining the heroic gesture as a smaller, incremental, highly sophisticated loop – obsessional, meticulous and labour-intensive. Completed in a signature palette of yellow and black, *INFINITY-DOTS [EFY]*, 2014, incorporates two motifs for which the artist is most celebrated – the dot and the pumpkin pattern. Almost abstract, its dotted vertical forms pulsing with optical energy, *INFINITY-DOTS [EFY]* reflects Kusama’s lifelong preoccupation with the infinite and sublime, as well as the twin themes of cosmic infinity and personal obsession as found in pattern and repetition.

Current major shows include Yayoi Kusama: *DANCING LIGHTS THAT FLEW UP THE UNIVERSE* at PHI Foundation, Montréal (until 15 January 2023), and Yayoi Kusama: *Infinity Rooms* at Tate Modern, London (until 11 June 2023).

Small-scale sculptures by **Sarah Sze**, such as *Model for a First Impression*, 2015, and *Model for a Double Entendre*, 2015, act as discrete models, serving as their own temporary site marking a precisely composed moment. The sculptures, conceived as models of chance occurrences, highlight the tension between the effort to map, dissect and understand information, and the inevitable measure of futility in that effort. Sze’s work often addresses questions about the fragility of human behaviour, the desire to model complex systems, and the impermanence of value and memory. To explore these ideas, she utilizes myriad everyday objects. Presented as traces of human behaviour, these items, released from their commonplace duty, acquire a certain vitality and ambition. Assemblages of these objects become systems, capable of renewal, aspiration and decay, or repositories of memory and value. Her work ascribes a new understanding of purpose while questioning the process of imbuing any material – hand-made or industrially produced – with worth.

A solo exhibition of work by the artist will take place at the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York, in 2023.

Flora Yukhnovich is acclaimed for paintings that, fluctuating between abstraction and figuration, transcend painterly traditions to fuse high art with popular culture and intellect with intuition. The artist has long been entranced by the idea of the *fête galante* – a type of painting depicting the wealthy at amorous play in parkland settings, which came to prominence with Jean-Antoine Watteau in the early eighteenth century. New paintings immerse us in this world of frolic and seduction with, to quote a recent essay by Eleanor Nairne, ‘marks that cavort across the canvas like ancient revellers, gesturing towards an image that never quite resolves.’ Yukhnovich has described her process as ‘searching for a language which sits between figuration and abstraction.’ She explains, ‘But really abstraction and figuration don’t feel separate to me. They are two different points in the same process, part of a spectrum which ranges from very loose, abstracted marks through to tightly articulated figuration. I do want the resulting paintings to remain open and ambiguous despite their figuration. The viewer has to fill in the looser areas in their mind and I hope that leads to a multiplicity of different readings.’

In 2023 Yukhnovich will be the first artist to take part in a new series of solo exhibitions responding to the collections of The Ashmolean, Oxford, titled *Ashmolean NOW*.

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