

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes in shades of blue, red, and yellow. The composition is dominated by large, rounded, organic shapes that resemble stylized letters or symbols. The background is a mix of these colors, with the blue lines and shapes standing out prominently. The overall style is gestural and expressive, characteristic of mid-20th-century abstract art.

Robert Egert
Anthropocene



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SRO GALLERY

1144 Dean Street, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, New York

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Robert Egert's immediately previous paintings were small, curvy and marvelously dense, like ideograms tooled in leather over a long Siberian winter by hunter-gatherers whose sacred geometry was sprung from tusk and antler. His work now emerges into the open, under a big sky. Here abstract painting grapples, as if it were sculpture, with literal landscape. Several of the new paintings recede into prairie space and cloudscape, while bodying forth into a reimagined version of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Isamu Noguchi that can co-exist with breezy 1950s *New Yorker* cartoons of construction workers eating sandwiches in the belly holes of reclining nudes. A couple of paintings seem to suggest how Paul Klee's *Revolution of the Viaduct* could work as a background for an animated Hawaiian Punch ad. At the far horizon of Egert's new territory, George Grosz — or rather his bedraggled avatar, the Painter of the Hole — has set up his easel. In the middle distance you can make out Max Ernst, Otto Dix, René Magritte and Giorgio De Chirico, fellow survivors of war and avant-gardism, stubborn purveyors of figures and landscapes in the age of abstraction.

And what was it we once meant by abstraction? Like Columbus discovering America, Cezanne voyaged across an ocean and made landfall, believing

he was elsewhere. Richard Shiff points out that “abstracted” means lost in thought, yet when speaking about art, the word has come to signify pure materialism — a materialism in which nothing can be added or taken away, nothing extracted, nothing abstracted. What you see is what you see. Instead, Shiff uses the word “distraction” to describe how Cezanne's slipping space and overt brush strokes, rhythmically independent of the subject, liberated later generations to see the materials of painting as means and ends in themselves.

The Big Bang of Twentieth Century abstraction has now slowed to an equilibrium in which material and image, high and low, float in zero gravity. Ruins run in reverse, and function follows form as often as not. So it is exemplary that in Egert's new paintings, abstraction feels free to get specific. Let's begin with *Tornado Alley* and *Cisgenia*, which transform the graphic clarity and restless, curling space of his earlier paintings into hallelujah choruses and heavenly fanfares. This contrapuntal visual music, although far more refined in silhouette, has perhaps more than a passing affinity with the madcap inventiveness of Dr. Seuss's three-nozzled bloozers from the Circus McGurkus. (At any rate, it's worth considering how Theodore Geisel implanted exuberant Cubist, biomorphic, and

Surrealist design into generations of contemporary artists' brains by liberating children's books from prevailing standards of genteel realism.)

If *Tornado Alley* and *Cisgenia* are airborne, *Spirit (or Soul)* is semi-subterranean. Egert says this painting is at the core of his practice, and indeed it reads like a cutaway view of compressed potential and hidden caverns. Although landscape elements are breaking free at the top, the rest is a cultivated puzzle of interlocking shapes embedded in their own negative space. In other paintings on view, similar cubist conundrums are isolated, and liberated. They become actors in a drama. *Death's Head Tree*, especially, is a self-entangled, concretely rendered monologue that lilts with animation. It is rooted in solid ground and stands clean against the sky.

Landscape [Espalier] adds more characters, with foreground repousoir and action on the wings, and the ground plane has been efficiently incised with a perspective grid. Upon this stage, Egert's intertangling, overlapping growth process morphs into cutout, bendable strips of sheet metal that play with dimensionality. Perhaps this sort of interplay of figure and ground is what Charles Ray has in mind when he says that if one were to rotate a David Smith sculpture set in a landscape “the world would turn with it.”

In *Monster Storm*, a finely honed sculptural scrim is set against a middleground of interweaving plumbing rendered with scratchy urgency. The palette is subtle and sooty. Standardized

indications of smoke and steam in the background suggest 1930s animation, factory pipes tooting along with Mickey or Popeye as they bounce with song. The hairy eyeball sort of cartooning is equally in play — that of Grosz, R. Crumb, Sue Coe and other graphic rebels. The mood, in any case, is nervous and unresolved rather than jaunty, the space claustrophobic despite its layers of distance.

Finally, *Anthropocene* is a spectacular outlier that tweaks the knobs of abstraction all the way to the post-apocalyptic. A woody corpse against barren ground, it is candidly illusionistic, lit with a sense of cinematic conviction that brings to mind the moralizing sunsets of Thomas Cole and Sanford Gifford, or alternately, a Sci-Fi paperback. Birthed in abstraction, however, the image remains ontologically tangled, closer in spirit to a scholar's rock or an uncanny Ernst forest, albeit a denuded one.

A hundred years on, pure abstraction today is a kind of sophisticated joke. Practitioners and enablers of shiny plastic abstraction, shamelessly nostalgic abstraction, crapstraction/zombie formalism, and so on — they are necessary tight rope walkers patrolling the event horizon of a slippery slope. Beyond is a black hole of credulity. That leaves plenty of room for the rest of us to build landscapes, figures, and still lives of some kind, of some degree, out of pure painting moves. It's a wide open territory, and Robert Egert, with astute painterliness, has staked out his own growing claim.

David Brody 2018



ABOVE: *Spontaneously Occuring Airborne Clowns*, 18 x 24", Oil on paper, 2017
OPPOSITE: *Cisgenia*, 48 x 48", Oil on canvas, 2017





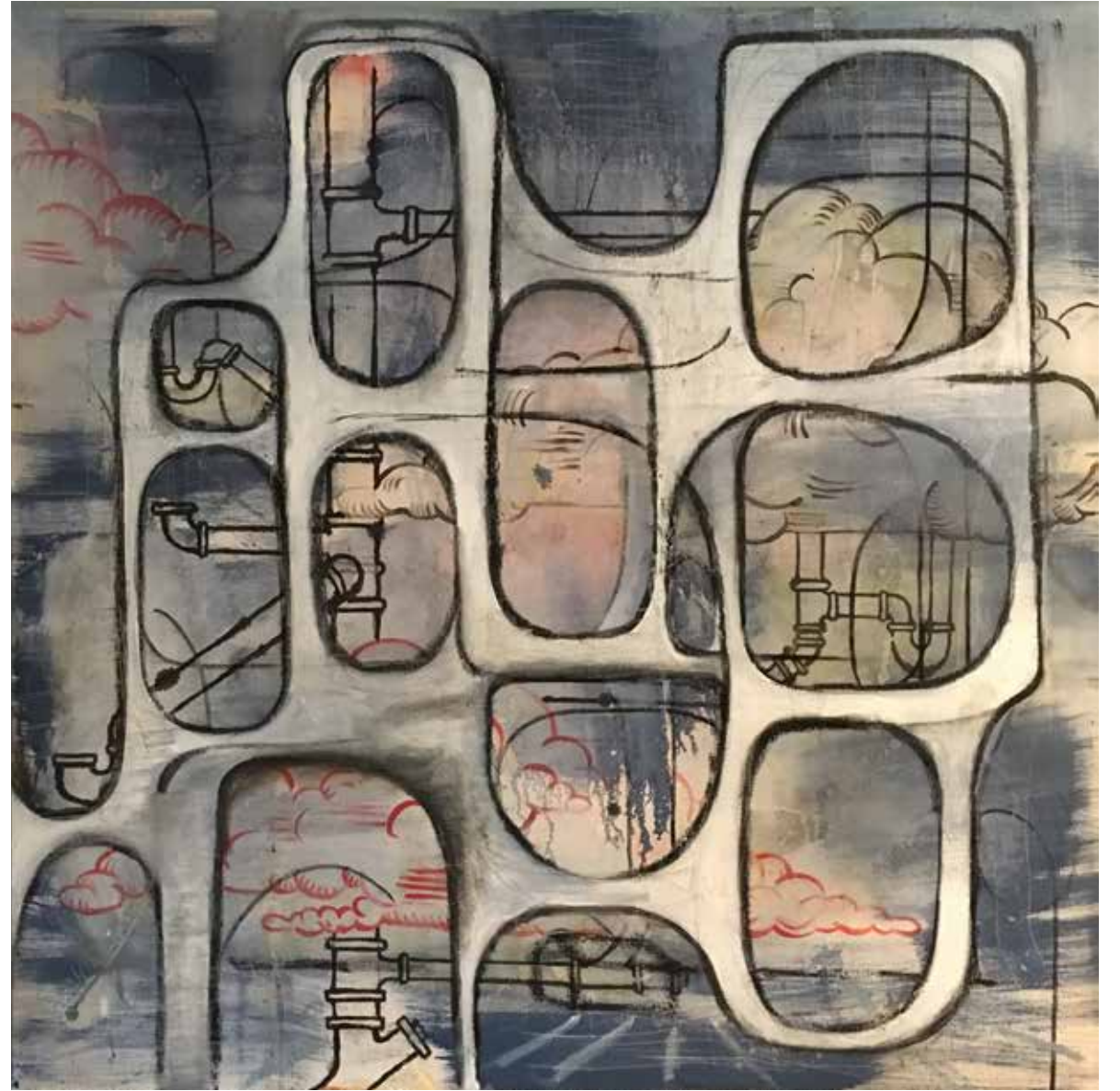
Espalier, 42 x 38", Oil on canvas, 2017



Soul (or Spirit), 42 x 38", Oil on canvas, 2017



Interior, 42 x 38", Oil on canvas, 2017

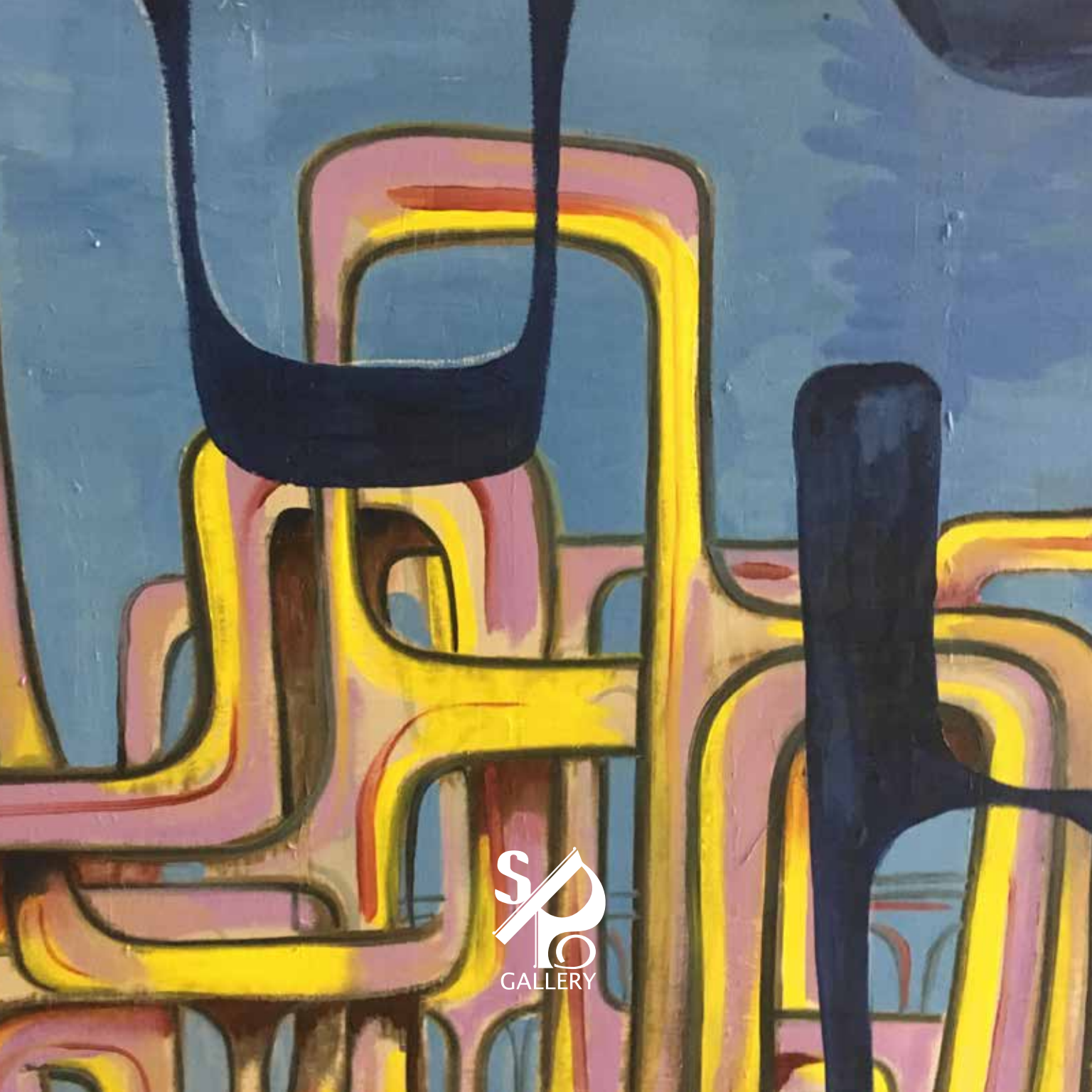


Monster Storm, 48 x 48", Oil on canvas, 2017



Anthropocene, 42 x 38", Oil on canvas, 2017

Robert Egert was born in Brooklyn in 1958 and began exhibiting his painting in New York in the 1980s. His paintings and works on paper are found in the US and in Europe. He currently works and resides in the New York metropolitan area.



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