

The New York Times

Roy Newell, Artist Known for Detailed Geometric Abstracts, Dies at 92

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Correction Appended

Roy Newell, a painter of geometric abstracts and one of the original members of the American Abstract Expressionists, died on Nov. 22 in Manhattan. He was 92.



Earl McGrath Gallery

Roy Newell's "Untitled," an oil made between 1956 and 1998.

The cause was cancer, said Anne Cohen, his wife.

Mr. Newell was a vivid colorist, dedicating himself to creating closely wrought, irregular geometrical pattern paintings that resemble quilted fields of color. He would often rework his paintings over the course of decades, slowly building up the geometric shapes and surfaces in countless

layers, using great densities of paint. Some of his paintings are an inch thick.

Though quietly admired by critics and peers, Mr. Newell remained outside of the art world mainstream. His market and visibility suffered from his irascible personality and his relentless perfectionism. He was a slow, episodic worker, showing seldom in a career of almost 70 years. His total output is believed to be fewer than 100 paintings.

Money never motivated him, and he had immense difficulty parting with paintings; in one famous incident, he requested a painting back from a collector so that he could rework it. Among his few patrons and supporters were the painters Willem and Elaine de Kooning, who in 1988 gave a painting by him to the [Guggenheim Museum](#). It is one of the few by him in a major museum collection, though recognition of his importance as an artist has gradually increased over time.

Roy Newell was born on the Lower East Side of Manhattan on May 10, 1914, the son of immigrants from Eastern Europe. He was one of four children, who all grew up in poverty after their father abandoned them. His mother, who was illiterate, worked odd jobs to support the family. He attended school only sporadically, immersing himself in poetry when he was there; he also learned to draw.

He was almost entirely self-taught as an artist, taking as his models and mentors the early Modern artists, particularly Cézanne; Kasimir Malevich and Russian Constructivists; and the Nabis painters. Later he was also drawn to the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), whose former studio on West 15th Street he once used as a studio and home.

In the early 1940s a chance meeting with de Kooning at the [New York Public Library on 42nd Street](#) drew him into the Abstract Expressionists' circle. He was later a member of the Eighth Street **Artists' Club**, an early gathering of a number of notable artists associated with the New York School, like de Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Franz Kline and Phillip Pavia.

Though he seldom exhibited his work, when he did so, it often received praise in The New York Times and other publications. Writing about his second show of abstractions at the Hacker Gallery in New York in 1953, a **writer for Art News noted, “He attacks white canvas rather like a blacksmith pounding on an anvil, and produces thereby an impression of vigor that scorns grace.”**

Mr. Newell was focused on painting to the exclusion of many things in his life. He rarely attended exhibition openings and never promoted himself and his paintings, relying on his wife, a schoolteacher, to support him. She

filling his apartment in Chelsea with rods, reels and fishing memorabilia, and making beautiful lures.

Correction: December 28, 2006

An obituary on Dec. 2 about the Abstract Expressionist artist Roy Newell misstated his connection with the Eighth Street Artists’ Club, an early gathering of a number of artists associated with the New York School. While he was a member, he was not a founder.