

HARRY BERTOIA

Four Decades of Drawings

Seraphin Gallery

## Preface

By Tony Seraphin

I first met Harry in 1972, when I approached him about showing some of his sculpture in my gallery. I was taken aback by his gentleness and that wonderful smile that teachers have with young students. Over the next few years my wife and I would go out to his studio in Bally to see new works, but best of all to the stone farm house in the woods he shared with Brigitta. Those are memories I will always cherish, sitting in the living room viewing snow on the ground through the window and a fire blazing with ten people all talking about art, politics and other subjects that kept us there until 2:00am. I knew Harry was an important artist, but he was also a great humanitarian, he loved people, even young people like myself who didn't grasp the entire statements he made about art. He just enjoyed being with people who loved art.

I only had one show with Harry in 1973. I realized early that his tonals touched all the basic senses, unlike static sculpture. Harry's austere works could transform a gallery into a music hall and everyone was a composer. However, on the walls were his mysterious lyrical colorful drawings, or mono-prints, and they told much more about Harry's inner thoughts and feelings over forty years. Each was unique, gentle, and at times reminded the viewer of being under the sea in a magical land of fantasy. Harry many times did these drawings late at night in another studio behind his home. One can imagine the stillness of the night and Harry releasing his thoughts through the flow of his hand across the paper. It is these four decades of delicate drawings that I feel will become precious objects in world class collections and it will be these drawings that take a person into the world of Harry Bertioia.

## Harry Bertioia's Drawings

By Donald Kuspit

When, in 1943, Hilla Rebay, a supporter of Kandinsky, and the director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Non-Objective Art, purchased some hundred drawings of Harry Bertioia, exhibiting nineteen of them, it was clear that she regarded him not simply as an epigone of Kandinsky, but as an artist who found new spiritual and expressive possibilities in non-objectivity—new “purely artistic” ways to express “internal necessity.” Kandinsky argued in *On the Spiritual in Art*, the Bible of pure abstraction. Clearly Rebay thought that Bertioia’s abstract drawings were of great importance. Her unequivocal, indeed, enthusiastic endorsement of them, suggests that she thought they advanced abstraction while remaining true to Kandinsky’s foundational principles. I will try to show how they did so: how Bertioia built on Kandinsky’s belief that affect was inherently non-objective and could only be expressed by non-objective—abstract—means, while returning abstraction to its roots in the perception of nature, suggesting that, after all, it was “objective” or object-oriented as well as subjective or affect-oriented.

Let us recall that Kandinsky began as an “Impressionist”—he called his “breakthrough” 1908-1909 Murnau landscape paintings “impressions,” and in 1911 painted a Romantic Landscape, an “abstract impressionist” work that showed how indebted to nature he remained even as he moved toward pure abstraction (pure “color language” and impulsive “improvisation”)—and how emotionally shallow and geometrically hollow his art became when he finally purged it of allusions to nature. Achieving purity, his abstraction lost its expressive power, not to say energy, and became merely clever: intense engagement with nature was its saving grace. I will argue that Bertioia’s return to nature saved abstraction from becoming a sterile formalism—a formal dead-end. In his *Aesthetic Theory* Theodor Adorno famously said that “by slaying the subject, reality itself becomes lifeless.” Kandinsky’s abstraction lost its