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AN AMERICAN IN PARIS: HOW PAINTER SHIRLEY JAFFE MASTERED THE SECRET OF HARD-EDGE VITALITY

By Richard Kalina

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Shirley Jaffe in her Paris studio.

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Shirley Jaffe (<https://www.artnews.com/t/shirley-jaffe/>), who died in 2016 a few days short of her 93rd birthday, is the subject of “Une Américaine à Paris,” a luminous retrospective currently at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The French capital was her adopted home, where she had lived and worked since 1949. While many American artists

came to Paris after the war—more than 300 were reportedly there in the 1950s—only a handful stayed more than a few years.

Drawn by the city's history, culture, and romantic bohemian life, these visitors found Paris cheap, especially after the 1948 devaluation of the French franc. Veterans could benefit from the GI Bill, which provided a cash stipend and tuition at places such as the Académie Julian, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and the École des Beaux-Arts. It also enabled Jaffe's husband, an American journalist assigned to Paris, to take classes at the Sorbonne.

Of course, cheap is not free, and circumstances in a country where the local artists could be unwelcoming, compatriots competitive, and the language a constant challenge often made for short stays. But for Jaffe, although she periodically considered moving back to New York, residing permanently in Paris turned out to be a good choice, both personally and professionally.

Not that life there was always easy for her. She had periods of real financial hardship, when she feared losing her apartment and had to obtain art supplies on credit. Yet to a reserved, hard-working woman like Jaffe, the city offered major compensations: in Paris you could be admired for the quality of your thoughts and the visual integrity of your art. Being foreign (and thus always a bit exotic) upended expectations and made you stand out.

Jaffe enjoyed both the calm, gray evenness of Paris and, on her occasional visits back, the jostling collage of New York. By living in the smaller and more welcoming Parisian milieu, she was able to exhibit consistently in galleries and then museums—probably more than she would have in midcentury New York, with its notoriously chauvinistic art scene. Calm, crisp, and purposeful, she received French commissions and grants, made enough sales to get by, and led the low-key daily life she wanted.



Shirley Jaffe: *Crazy Jane at Appomattox*, 1956, oil on canvas, approx. 102 1/2 by 75 inches.

COURTESY SHIRLEY JAFFE ESTATE AND GALERIE NATHALIE
OBADIA, PARIS/BRUSSELS/©ADAGP, PARIS 2022

A painter above all else, originally trained at the Cooper Union in New York and the Phillips Art School in Washington, DC, Jaffe lived austere for nearly fifty years in a well-lit, modest-size, fifth-floor studio in an 18th-century walk-up building on the rue Saint-Victor in the Latin Quarter. Although a fixture in the Paris art world, she never fancied herself French, speaking the language fluently but with an American accent. In a 1991 interview with Catherine Lawless, a philosopher friend, she remarked, “I’m between two worlds, and I am happy to experience that gap.”

Jaffe had a talent for friendship. During her early years in France, she was close to the American artists Sam Francis, Joan Mitchell, Janice Biala, Norman Bluhm, Jules Olitski, Al Held, and Kimber Smith, as well as the Canadian painter Jean-Paul Riopelle. Over time, her warm acquaintances transcended cultural origins and generations. “Homage to Shirley Jaffe,” a lively show at Galerie Nathalie Obadia in Paris running through July 29, features

works by Jessica Stockholder, Fiona Rae, Robert Kushner, Carole Benzaken, Claude Viallat, Bernard Piffaretti, and Pierre Buraglio—all of whom had personal connections with her.

Jaffe's early paintings reflect the Abstract Expressionism of her first aesthetic comrades and the 1950s art world in general. But while those gestural works earned Jaffe the respect of other artists, they have now been overshadowed by the lean, chromatically rich, hard-edge paintings she made from the 1970s on.

One of the pleasures of the Pompidou survey is seeing the early (and in recent years rarely exhibited) gestural paintings in relation to the late geometric ones, along with a selection of energetic transitional images dating from the mid- to late '60s. And seeing such canvases with Jaffe's works on paper—always looser in execution than her paintings and never studies for them—does a service to both.

The show's earliest expressionistic works—several untitled paintings from 1952—are not as sophisticated in terms of color as the post '70s works, but their evenly distributed, tightly packed marks, punctuated by brilliant transparent crimsons and whitened cobalt blues as well as flashes of light background-like neutrals, convey a sense of fullness and light.

Other works of this period, such as *Crazy Jane at Appomattox* (1956), feature larger aggregations of mixed color areas or chunky, partially articulated dark forms set against scumbled areas of lighter paint. The compositions are vigorous and jostling, yet still warmly atmospheric. Jaffe continued developing along these lines for 10 years, producing works that, while very much attuned to the **gesturalism** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/gesturalism/>) of the times, speak of a quiet and balanced individual sensibility.

A 1963 Ford Foundation grant that enabled her to spend a year and a half in Berlin fatefully interrupted Jaffe's slow steady evolution. This important break moved her away from her Paris friends, gave her a stipend and a large studio, and introduced her to the work of other foundation grantees at the time, notably, avant-garde composers Elliott Carter and Iannis Xenakis (who was also an architect and sometime collaborator with Le Corbusier). Their experiments with musical structure were complex and analytical, and the contemporary concerts Jaffe attended in Berlin featuring the works of Carter, Xenakis, and Karlheinz Stockhausen inspired her.

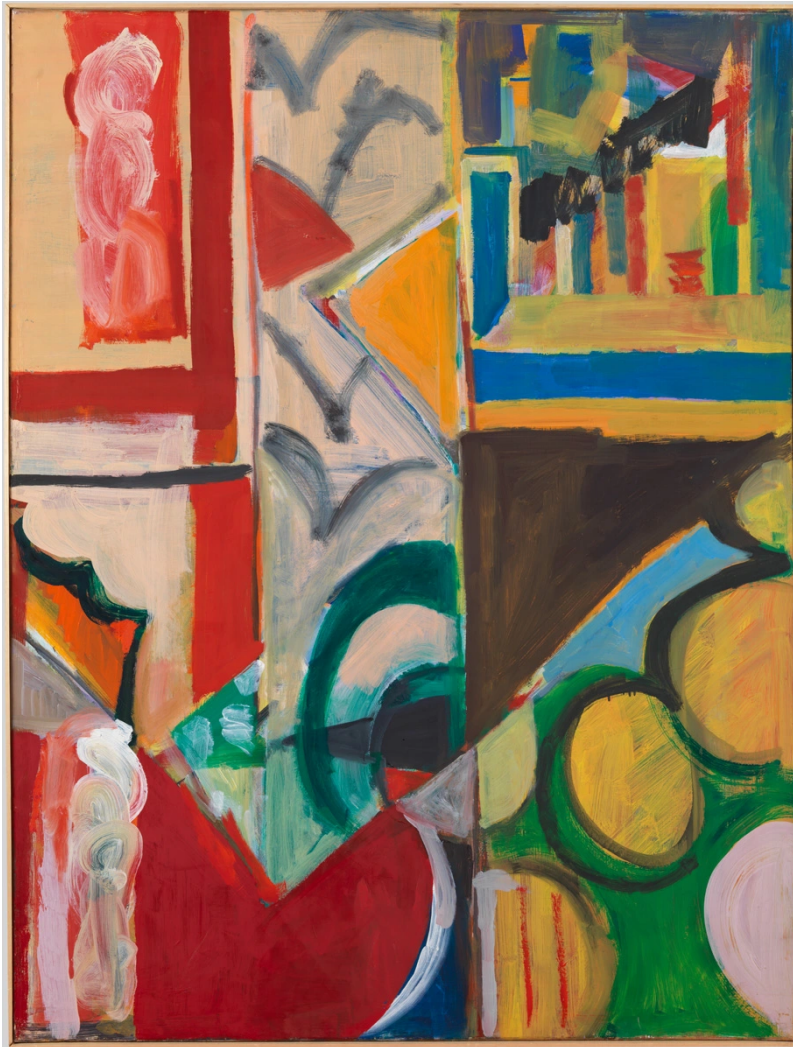


View of the exhibition “Shirley Jaffe: An American Woman in Paris,” 2022, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris.

MNAM-CCI/HELENE MAURI

During her stay in Berlin, Jaffe’s work became more dynamic and harsh, characterized by sharp angles, long violent strokes, and brighter colors. The effect was more musical, but scarcely in a melodic way. *The Red Diamond* (1964), a 77-by-53-inch painting emblematic of that period, comprises diagonal slashes of bright, slightly whitened primaries interspersed with a few light orange-pinks and some dark roughened lines. The painting is unsettled and unsettling, as were others that followed, among them the vertical *Long Black* (1965–66), with its dark, broken crisscrossings up and down the colorfully mottled field.

Would Jaffe push further in that direction, jacking up the tension, or would she tamp things down? Before long, she seemed to opt for the latter. *Little Matisse*, a key painting from 1968, features a quiet geometry that gives form and containment to the gestures. You can sense the partially open hotel windows that Matisse loved to paint, the rectilinear glass and wood imperfectly containing sketched-in rounded forms. It is a successful painting, but Jaffe did not ultimately take the path it seems to set out.



Shirley Jaffe: *Little Matisse*, 1968, oil on canvas, approx. 47 b7 36 inches.
COLLECTION CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS/©ADAGP, PARIS 2022

In a 1981 interview with art historian Merle Schipper, published in the *Woman's Art Journal*, the artist described her thinking during this crucial period:

“What became apparent to me was that I would start a painting and complete it without being able to exercise the control over the matter that interested me. Eventually, I realized that my manner of painting was preventing me from developing what was important to me. I couldn't control the color. The gesture was getting in the way.... I knew that if I wanted to control my paintings, I'd have to control the gesture, but that would be intellectual dishonesty. If you are using gesture it has to be free. If you are going to rework the painting and rework the gesture, rework the color, then the gesture has no basis. I realized then that I had to find another manner, one that would have its own validity, that would be more honest.”

That year of Jaffe's transition, 1968, was not a neutral one in France. As it did elsewhere, it brought extreme political unrest, marked by demonstrations and riots, especially in the Left Bank environs where Jaffe lived. While denying any direct influence from the events of

May 1968, she told critic Raphael Rubinstein in a *Brooklyn Rail* exchange in 2010: “The student upheaval gave everybody a sense that we can do something else.”

Jaffe *did* something else by fully rethinking her art, with aesthetic disruption softened by a new professional stability. She joined the supportive and highly regarded Galerie Jean Fournier, where she remained until the end of the '90s. (Nathalie Obadia in Paris represented her starting in 1999, and Tibor de Nagy in New York starting in 2002.) With a solid exhibition base, she could afford to take risks.

In Jaffe's earlier work the entire painting space was filled with incident and color, and the new work maintained a fully painted-in, edge-to-edge surface. Flat colored forms touch other flat colored forms with no intervening space, and they advance and recede purely chromatically, with the exception of a few small areas that could be read as “on top of” or “behind.”

The surface of these new paintings is taut and, for the most part, impenetrable, relying on sophisticated color interactions to open it up. *The Gray Center* (1969) features two columns, each containing three rectangular blocks of equal size, flanking a center column in medium gray. A thin reddish-orange strip, superimposed on the gray band, hugs the upper third of the right-hand column. Diagonal shapes fill four of the six blocks, rectangles occupy another, and four truncated and squeezed semicircles inhabit the last. While some of the colors are quite close in hue and tone, no two are exactly alike. The visual arrangement is logical and disruptive in equal measure.



Shirley Jaffe: *F's Picture*, 1968, oil on canvas, 57 1/2 by 38 3/16 inches.
PRIVATE COLLECTION/COURTESY ESTATE OF SHIRLEY JAFFE/
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This approach was appealingly direct, but Jaffe did not simply divide up the picture plane. She added visual elements to break the compositional order. In *F's Picture* (1968), for example, she inserted a single loosely drawn, red sickle-shaped line into a gray rectangular cell, while everything else (except a small partial circle in the upper-right corner) remained resolutely orthogonal; and in an untitled work from 1971 she used six small, colored triangles, set onto a narrow white band, to pry apart two larger filled-in and divided-up rectangular sections.

Those modest interventions, while effective, proved limiting. Jaffe soon developed more dramatic strategies to upset the paintings' balance. She adopted complicated, multisided forms; used sharper tonal jumps that broke the planar read; employed bright primaries pushed up against hard-to-name earth tones; and layered paintings with wiggly, curving

shapes and linear elements that are partially calligraphic and partially architectural. These moves sharply raised the optical stakes and made the paintings hot, jumpy, and increasingly inventive. Jaffe was clearly coming to terms with a new and promising formal vocabulary.

And then, starting in the early '80s, came the breakthrough that in retrospect seemed inevitable. Jaffe opened her paintings up, setting her forms against a white ground that allowed them to breathe while serving as both a foil for the colored shapes and a coherent set of pictorially active negative spaces. Colors rarely repeat in a painting, but the white ground does.

Jaffe did not work from preparatory drawings, nor did she go in for wholesale changes once a painting was underway. Her process was gradually additive, with much attention paid to finely calibrated adjustment of shape and color. To do this when forms abutted required reworking not just a given shape, but also those adjacent to it. With a form on a white field, the task was more direct, and from the '80s on, those forms became even more complex and sophisticated, with each shape drawn with just enough internal part-to-part dissonance to thwart easy resolution.

These well-tuned paintings returned to the modernist musicality of the post-Berlin work, but with increased formal confidence, and without the clangor. *Sailing* (1985) disperses a variety of forms across its surface—some small (the circular and rectilinear shapes that spill down the right-hand portion of the painting), some medium (various wedges and T-forms), and some larger (a curvy beige, vaguely torso-like shape flanked by five orange vertical slats sitting below a beam of horizontal purple triangles, which in turn is topped by a reddish-brown form that recalls a pair of wings.)

All this activity shouldn't cohere—it feels like the temporary meetings-up of clouds scudding across the sky or a crowd in motion—but Jaffe makes it all work in a way that transcends, as the best painting does, the stasis and spatial-temporal limitations of flat, bounded two-dimensional surfaces.



Shirley Jaffe: *Four Squares Black*, 1993, oil on canvas, oil on canvas, 84 1/2 by 70 3/4 inches.

PRIVATE COLLECTION/COURTESY SHIRLEY JAFFE ESTATE/

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Jaffe's new open format led her to greater experimentation, both in the placement of forms—separation or superimposition became strategic choices—and with color. Consider the use of the intense but slightly different yellows in *Four Squares Black* (1993). In the foreground they are the colors of the multiple arching lines that span the four black off-square shapes at the top half of the painting, while another closely related yellow pervades the plane on which the squares sit. You immediately feel something subliminally vibrating, but seeing the variation in the yellow requires a close and steady regard.

In Jaffe's paintings of this period, chromatic subtlety also shows itself in an expanded use of deadened umbers, unobtrusive ochers, fleshy off-pinks, and grayed purples, which are often set in counterpoint to bright reds and yellows. The white too is never straight out of the tube, but is always carefully tinted and adjusted. Its function as the ground makes it a formal and compositional given, and it is experienced as a distinct color only if you spend time with it.

As the years went on, Jaffe rendered the balance between part and whole, chaos and order, even more precarious. She seemed to be constantly on the lookout for fresh moves and

motifs, new ways to mix things up. Starting in earnest in the mid-'90s and continuing to the end of her days, she allowed some of the scribbled or fuzzed looseness of her untitled drawings to migrate into her paintings, breaking the normal monochrome flatness of the colored shapes. You can see it in the large, scumbled gray area that serves as a crisply defined background to a largely black-and-white section of *Playground* (1995), the furry lavender-pink bean-like shape in *New York* (2001), the scuffed and scored orangey ovoid that anchors *Pise* (2003), or the pink, truncated triangular form loosely crosshatched in orange in *All Yellow* (2011).

The Pompidou retrospective, sensitively and expertly organized by Jaffe's longtime friend Frédéric Paul, shows the development of an artist whose work is very much on the minds of abstract painters in the United States and Europe today. Her rapport with the Pattern and Decoration movement (primarily through critic Amy Goldin, painter Robert Kushner, and sculptor George Sugarman) created a group of admirers in the US. That connection led to two shows at the Holly Solomon Gallery in New York, the epicenter of that movement, although Jaffe herself never participated in any Pattern and Decoration exhibitions. (Nor was her work attuned to the formal repetitions and cultural allusions often seen in the work of those artists.) Over the years, Jaffe, always a quiet but determined feminist, also attracted a devoted following among younger women abstractionists like Polly Apfelbaum, Shirley Kaneda, Amy Sillman, Beatriz Milhazes, Sarah Morris, Charline von Heyl, Patricia Treib, and Nora Griffin.



Shirley Jaffe: *Playground*, 1995, oil on canvas, approx. 88 1/2 by 122 inches.

FONDATION CARTIER POUR L'ART CONTEMPORAIN COLLECTION,
PARIS/COURTESY SHIRLEY JAFFE ESTATE/©ADAGP, PARIS 2022

Jaffe's turn away from expressionist gesture to something tighter, brisker, and more declarative was in line with the change made by many of her abstractionist contemporaries, such as Jules Olitski and Al Held. But Jaffe was on to something more, and she pursued it

diligently until the end. Her work, intelligent and conceptually grounded, never comes across as ironic or overthought. While critics have often compared her work to that of Matisse (especially the cutouts) and Stuart Davis, Jaffe was dismissive of such associations. Careful looking upholds this, and visual affinity is not the same as real influence or shared interest.

Jaffe stood on her own. For the most part, she avoided overt historical references or any hint of landscape, and stayed clear of materials-oriented decisions. Her oeuvre is **pure painting** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/pure-painting/>) without being reductive or doctrinaire. Melding imagination, craft, and focus, Jaffe made abstractions that are tightly flexed and carefully composed, yet, at the same time, loose and open-ended. She was a virtuoso of form and perception, and an exemplar of dedication and persistence.

“Shirley Jaffe: Une Américaine à Paris” is on view at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, through Aug. 29. The show then travels to the Kunstmuseum, Basel, Mar. 25–July 30, 2023, and the Musée Matisse, Nice, Oct. 11, 2023–Jan. 8, 2024.



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