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REVIEWS
NEW YORK

Roger-Edgar Gillet

Petzel Gallery | 520 W 25th Street

By Jonathan Odden



Roger-Edgar Gillet, *Les voyeurs*, 1975, oil on canvas, 73 3/4 × 118".

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Is a six-piece appetizer ever really a full meal? Odd as it sounds, this exhibition of paintings by Roger-Edgar Gillet (1924–2004)—his second with Petzel, titled “Dinner Party”—answered the question decisively: Yes, it can be a feast.

Lest one be sated already by meal metaphors, there were, in fact, multiple moments in the show where the painterly commingled with the gustatory. In *Nature morte aux cotelettes* (Still Life with Cutlets), 1980, for instance, the artist pushed around a cascade of vegetables rendered in heavy oils until they flanked one of the titular chops, a hunk of bone adumbrated by a

fleshy cadmium red, sinews glistening. (You could almost smell the linseed oil.) In a similar vein, the chop's sanguine hues bleed into the heap of shellfish of *Les homards* (The Lobsters), 1969, a pile of peculiar little creatures, raw and cooked—a reminder that, more than anything, Gillet was a painter of ambiguous, ambulatory meats. Many call this portraiture. Today, Gillet is remembered primarily for his association with *art brut* and art informel, movements of the late 1940s and the '50s that shared an affinity with the base, the brutal, and the corporeal. Michel Tapié—the major champion of art informel whose foundational 1952 catalogue, *Un art autre* (Another Art), included Gillet's work—noted this visceral dimension from the start. He expressed it with culinary metaphors. Recalling Jean Dubuffet's *Madame mouche* (Madame Fly), 1945, for instance, he wrote in 1948: "Figure with colors of caramel, eggplant, blackberry jelly, and caviar, adorned with egg-white holes in which a syrupy varnish of molasses color has accumulated here and there."

Gillet's *Untitled*, 1996, could support a similar description: It is a Maillard reaction of messy ochers, lardoons of paint marbled into form. But the scrapple is also a portrait (or anti-portrait, to employ a term the artist used as early as the mid-'60s), albeit one so layered by palette knife that no discernible features—save for the outline of a head—coalesce into recognition. Though executed late in the artist's life, the canvas hints at the shift separating Gillet from his contemporaries—namely, a return to figuration just as postpainterly abstraction was becoming *à plat du jour*. The artist's reversion to this mode is often discussed in reviews and press releases and, like any worthwhile biographical chestnut, is overdetermined. It goes like this: In 1955, in New York, and in a moment of high abstraction, Gillet stood before El Greco's *Cardinal Fernando Niño de Guevara*, ca. 1600, and was struck by the figure's face, his glare from behind a pair of little round spectacles. As the artist later recalled, "Before the wickedness of this look I told myself that with abstract painting we lost something: We could no longer paint the depth of a look."

Such a realization might strike the arch formalist as obvious—part of the modernist project is to mourn painting's losses—but Gillet's recalcitrance

set him against both the supremacy of 1960s flatness and the trends toward anti- or acultural painting embraced by Tapié and critic Charles Estienne. Sensing this, Estienne—who had coined the term New School of Paris in 1952 and included Gillet in that formulation—later recast the artist as a true outsider. He worked *dans la solitude impitoyable*, observed Estienne: “Baudelaire was very alone at home in Paris, Gauguin alone at home in the Marquesas . . . and Gillet is very alone at home in his painting.” Gillet’s show was scumbled with that pitiless solitude, even among works overwhelmed by figuration. *Les voyeurs*, 1975, the largest work on view, exuded this scopophilic “alone at home” effect. The figures surround what feels like a sacrificial event—as if one were witness to the Bacchae’s frenzy. They cluster in shadow but do not recede in depth; they merely flatten. And here is the contradiction driving Gillet’s work: The more he strove to return to the intensity of looking, the shallower his field of view became.