

REGILLET



Tambour d'Eau. oil on canvas. 1984.

Selections from the **Stephane Janssen** collection

June 16 through August 5, 1990

THE DREAMLIKE WORLD OF R. E. GILLET



L'Arche d'Alliance. oil on canvas. 1953.

A dreamlike, and sometimes nightmarish, quality is pervasive in the paintings of French artist R. E. Gillet. Anne Tronche has eloquently described this aura in a 1987 exhibition catalogue essay: "Gillet makes a concentrated effort, from canvas to canvas, to experiment with escape systems that enable one to flee from the incantations of space and time. . ."¹ These "escape systems" include Gillet's ambiguous use of space, light, and color which tends to remove his subjects from any specific location or time period—placing them in a nebulous state associated with dreams.

Gillet's ambiguity is an important factor in the broad expressionism of his paintings. For instance, Gillet began the series "La Marche des Oubliés" (The March of the Forgotten) in 1988 as a commemoration of the French Revolution. However, in the series' ten paintings, seven of which are included in

this exhibition, Gillet moved away from historical narrative and toward an expression of the more global quest for freedom by Third World countries. Gillet refrains from including specific details that would give viewers concrete points of reference, and instead depicts anonymous crowds of amorphous figures which exist in an undefined landscape.

By including work dating from the 1950s to the present, this exhibition shows how the expressive qualities found in "La Marche des Oubliés" series have developed throughout Gillet's career. Gillet began painting in the late 1940s amidst the climate generated by the American Abstract Expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. Non-representational painting that called attention to the artist's personal gesture, as well as the painted surface of the canvas, was emphasized by these artists. Although Gillet's work of the 1950s exhibits some characteristics of Abstract Expressionism, he never truly abandoned recognizable subject matter. In paintings such as "L'Arche d'Alliance" (1953), "Saül" (1954), and "Le Sorcier Rouge" (1959) reference to the human figure



Le Corsage Rouge. oil on canvas. 1967.



Le Harem (Signal). oil on canvas. 1969.

is clearly visible. Even in these early examples there is evidence of Gillet's mature style; the "escape systems" are already in place. For instance, the abstract figure in "L'Arche d'Alliance" hovers in an indistinct space, and Gillet's somber palette serves to detach the subject from a sense of reality—a quality that will be especially important in his later work.

In 1963 Gillet's work became more overtly figurative. Paintings such as "Femme Assise" (1966) and "Le Corsage Rouge" (1967) continue the emphasis on a single figure found in the work from the 1950s. As in the disturbing expressionism found in British artist Francis Bacon's work, Gillet's figures appear incredibly vulnerable to the eerie darkness which surrounds, and seemingly dissolves, them. "Le Corsage Rouge" provides an example of Gillet's tendency to use brilliant color sparingly in a single gesture similar to the unexpected burst of blue found in the

painting that gives "La Marche des Oubliés" series its name.

In the early 1970s Gillet began to shift from the emphasis on the single figure to a vaguely heroic genre which concentrates on group scenes, therefore necessitating a change in the format of his canvases, from vertical to horizontal. These horizontal compositions also began to include the viewer in a more active way—as a voyeur who seems to stand at the edge of the anonymous crowds. In "Au Théâtre ce Soir III" (1974) the viewer is a backstage observer of an unexplainably macabre scene of dancing figures. There is an uneasy sense of frenzy to the dreamlike scene which is intensified by the way in which the sea of anonymous figures forming the audience appears to converge upon the dancing figures. There is also a strange tension in "Tambour d'Eau" (1984), as if the viewer has stumbled upon a secret ritual.

Gillet's architectural scenes are equally obscure. Some, like "Forumara" (1983) and "La Grande Ville" (1984), are unpopulated; while others, such as "Ville et Gens" (1983) and "Ville et Personnages" (1983), include swarms of figures in the foreground. All the compositions, however, are bathed in a strange light which seems to make pigmentation fade, leaving pale colors that, as Tronche notes, "disperse the memory of the real."² This otherworldly light does not follow the rules of nature, since it appears to cast no shadows. The buildings themselves are strangely detached from reality since they often do not make sense architecturally, with stairways and walkways leading nowhere—an aspect that adds to the plight of the masses depicted in the foreground.

In his most recent work, Gillet has concentrated on abstracted landscapes and seascapes. As in the cityscapes, the landscapes vary in the inclusion of human figures. However, the figures that are included have been reduced to an even greater degree of

anonymity. Often rendered as linear sketches, they seem secondary to the concern with expressive, gestural brushstrokes that are more frenzied, less controlled, than in Gillet's earlier work. Once again, these untitled works are more about expression than describing a specific site.

As the exhibition illustrates, Gillet's forty-year-long painting career has been dedicated to a haunting expressionism which is manifested in the dreamlike environs of his compositions. The artist's use of "escape systems"—non-specific figures, space, light, and color—is the key to the way his paintings relate, on a profound level, to a broad audience. Stephane Janssen, who has been collecting Gillet's work for thirty-five years, gives a fitting tribute to the global expressionism of his favorite painter's work: "He [Gillet] certainly helped me to better understand the world."³

Susan G. Baley
Curator of Education



Au Théâtre ce Soir III or Vus de Dos. oil on canvas. 1974.



Ville et Gens. oil on canvas. 1983.

NOTES

¹ Anne Tronche. *R. E. Gillet*, (Paris: Centre National des Arts Plastiques), p. 6. Translated from the French by Grant Moak.

² Ibid.

³ Stephane Janssen. *R. E. Gillet: La Marche des Oubliés*, (Saint-Priest, France: Centre d'Art Contemporain).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Between the artist's studio and the museum exists the realm of the collector, and the stories of the three make up the history of art.

The University of Oklahoma Museum of Art is indebted to Stephane Janssen, the collector, for sharing the work of R. E. Gillet with this museum and our public. We wish to acknowledge Mr. Janssen's generous support for the artists and museums of our time and offer our special appreciation to him for making this exhibition possible.

Thomas R. Teperzer
Director