HYPERALLERGIC

Eye-Opener: Paul Feeley 1957–1962

by John Yau September 15, 2013

Paul Feeley, "Caligula" (1960), oil-based enamel on canvas, 81 1/2 x 105 inches (all images via Garth Greenan Gallery)

1.
For those who think they know the work of Paul Feeley (1910–1966), especially if they are basing it on the two exhibitions he has had in New York in the last decade, at Matthew Marks in 2002 and 2009, the current exhibition, *Paul Feeley: 1957–1962*, at Garth Greenan Gallery (September 5–October 12, 2013), will likely come as a surprise.

As David Anfam points out in the catalogue, published for this exhibition, Feeley's reputation rests on "the scant decade" in which he produced paintings, sculptures and watercolors that were regularly exhibited in his lifetime, beginning in 1955 and lasting until 1965. In 1966, he died from leukemia. In 1968, the Guggenheim Museum mounted *Paul Feeley (1910–1966): A Memorial Exhibition* (April 1–May 26, 1968).

After his death, Feeley's work was periodically shown during the first half of 1970s, but faded from view until the end of the 1990s. The current exhibition suggests that we take another, longer look at an artist whose mature work may occupy more territory than we have been led to believe during the past decade.

Starting during his lifetime, and continuing until now, Feeley's supporters have tended to emphasize his emblematic abstractions, which he largely did between 1962 and 1965, confining much of what we know of his work to the last three years of a highly productive decade. In addition to connecting his use of central forms and repeated motifs, often in a symmetrical cluster, to the work of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and other Color Field painters, Feeley's supporters often emphasize the affinity they share with Noland's targets and chevrons. This was certainly true of the exhibitions at Matthew Marks in 2002 and 2009. The problem is that once a story gets told often enough — no matter how incomplete or off the mark — it has the traction to push out other considerations.

2.
By shifting the focus to 1957–'62 — the latter being the year that Feeley began making the emblematic abstractions that seemed to have secured his reputation — we learn that the oeuvre contains a wider range of works than we might have previously thought. These are just a few of the things that struck me about work in the exhibition: Feeley was intensely interested in a confounded figure-ground relationship; he was able to economically synthesize the formal and the comic; he was attentive to the erotic; his work clearly stands apart from Color Field painting.

Another thought I had was that it is high time that we uncover and develop an alternative history to Abstract Expressionism, beginning with two artists who, chronologically speaking, belong to the first generation, but who consciously and rigorously rejected it: Feeley and Myron Stout (1908–1987). Both were influenced by their love for ancient Greece, where symmetry, restraint and simplification reigned. Rooted in drawing, they never became gestural painters.

Feeley and Stout were intimate with Abstract Expressionism, and knew artists associated with it, and, in Feeley's case, promoted it through exhibitions at Bennington College, where he taught (1939–1943 and 1946–1966), but ultimately they rejected it because it was too chaotic for them.

At the same time, as Anfam points out in his essay, Feeley rejected the available options:

> *Following Helen Frankenthaler's precedent, Feeley thinned his alkyd enamel pigment, except not to the degree that it soaks fully into the canvas like hers and acquires associations with bodily fluids and watercolor. Instead, the paint sits more on the surface without, however, maintaining the tactile firmness identified with even thin oil pigment. Likewise, Feeley's no-nonsense palette is remote from the saturated opulence to mainstream Color Field art (to which, contrary to various critical bids, it does not belong) and tempered by the systematic principles of industrial design, just as his contours are too pliant to conform to Hard Edge painting.*

Anfam goes on to say that Feeley's work "pivots on drawing and outline," which is what he shares with Stout. Both wanted to define an archaic form, which distinguishes them from their contemporaries. One more point I want to make about Feeley's paint — he used ship and deck enamel in commercial colors, which is not what artists associated with Color Field painting were using. Rather than being part of a movement or stylistic trend, and, despite however close they were to artists associated with Abstract Expressionism (Stout studied intermittently with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown) and with Color Field painting (Frankenthaler was a student of Feeley at Bennington), they went off on their own — and the work they made calmly and self-assuredly exudes that independence. This seems necessary to point out at a time when nothing is central, but there remains a great pressure on everyone to conform.

3.
In "Untitled" (1959), one of the earliest works in the exhibition, three pale blue, supple phallic forms descend straight down from the painting's upper edge, invading a pinkish field. Or is it the other way around, with two pink, mitten-like forms rising from the painting's bottom edge, pushing their way into a blue field (or sky)? One cannot help but notice that middle phallic form is larger than the ones adjacent to it, so that that combination resembles a penis flanked on either side by drooping testicles.

Or are all three forms udders, with the middle one stretched out? Are the mittens beseeching heaven? Don't they also resemble the roots of molars? In many of the paintings he did during the period covered by the exhibition, we cannot decide which shape is the figure, and which is the ground, because they keep exchanging roles. This playfulness, and the rowdy and irreverent associations Feeley's figure-ground compositions are capable of stirring up, is a far cry from Pop Art, Minimalism and Color Field painting.

In addition to Stout, the other artist I see an affinity with is Nicholas Krushenick (1929–1999), a maverick who was influenced by Matisse, and whose work took off after he saw *JAZZ by Henri Matisse* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (June 17–September 19, 1960). In their work, both Feeley and Krushenick concentrated much of their attention on figure-ground relationships and how to generate contradictory possibilities out of the instability and tension between surface and depth.

4.
Feeley's inventiveness with figure-ground relationships complements his emblematic abstractions as well as broadens his oeuvre. Between 1957 and '62, we see the edges of the rhythmically curving forms get crisper. In them we see him becoming more direct about his love for the archaic and sinuous forms. We also see the simple become increasingly complex and dense with possibility. Isn't it time for a museum show and monograph on Feeley, who hasn't had such an exhibition in more than forty years and has never had a substantial monograph?

There is a photograph of the artist's studio — a barn-like structure — in a field, with two towering Doric columns nearby. Feeley took these columns from a building that was being torn down in Troy, New York, and transported them to his studio in Vermont. It couldn't have been an easy thing to do.

I think that photograph should be on the cover of the monograph, a reminder of Feeley's deep interest in ancient Greece and the Classical world, as well as conveys his ambition and desire for autonomy. I am reminded of Henry David Thoreau, who said: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

It is time we looked at Feeley with fresh eyes. This exhibition is a promising start.

Paul Feeley: 1957–1962 continues at the Garth Greenan Gallery (529 West 20th Street, 10th Floor) until October 12.