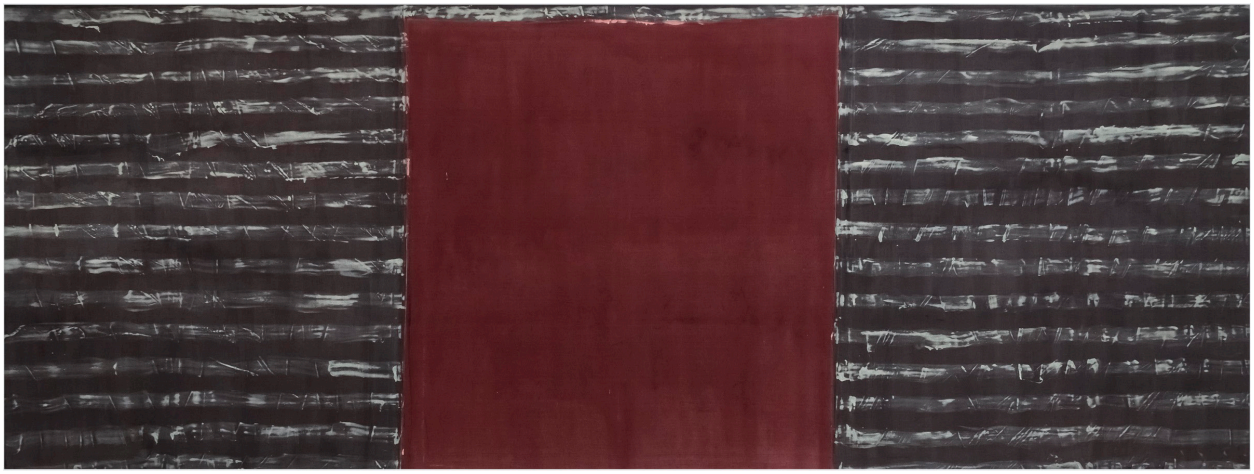
Art in America

INTERVIEWS

Judit Reigl and Jean-Paul Ameline

by Jean-Paul Ameline Apr 3, 2009



Unfolding (Déroulement), 1976, mixed media on canvas, 86 1/2 x 230 1/2 inches

Opening today, Janos Gat Gallery presents its third exhibition of the work of Judit Reigl, a Hungarian-born painter who arrived in Paris in 1950 to escape the artistic oppression of the Iron Curtain. Once closely associated with the Surrealists, Reigl broke with that tradition to focus on abstract painting. Her solo exhibition, on view through May 30th, focuses on Unfolding, a series of works made between 1974 and 1986. Jean-Paul Ameline, Chief Curator at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, met with Reigl to revisit her illustrious career.

JEAN-PAUL AMELINE: Judit, you came to Paris in June of 1950, at the age of twenty-seven. You left your native Hungary in March of the same year. What were the circumstances?

JUDIT REIGL: I crossed Europe mostly on foot, or I took my chances by hitch-hiking. And at times, I relied on newfound friends who offered me train tickets. I always had fortune in my misfortune!

JPA: This exit from Hungary, was it illegal?

JR: Absolutely, Iron Curtain included! I actually left Hungary for the first time in 1946 with three painter friends on a scholarship to study art in Italy, but on my return to Budapest at the end of October 1948, I had to surrender my passport. Stalinism had just taken hold and they started to commission works from us in the socialist-realist style.

JPA: So you left Hungary for artistic reasons?

JR: 120 percent! Though actually I was full of enthusiasm: I wanted to build socialism, I was an idealist, naïve. But reality was the opposite of my hopes: My commissions from the Ministry of Culture were to paint portraits of Stalin, Gerö, and Rákosi. On their part, the French allowed me to come to Paris, but my application for a new passport to leave Hungary was turned down. And I was even denied the vouchers needed to buy painting supplies. After eight illegal attempts I succeeded, on the ninth try, in breaching the Iron Curtain, walking twenty miles across the Russian zone to Fürstenfeld in the English one. From the tenth of

March to the end of June of 1950, I crossed Europe with minimal help. In Switzerland they proposed that I work for a year as a cleaning lady or in a factory. I refused and asked one thing of the Swiss, that they allow me to go to the French border. But they wouldn't allow it. In the end, I went through Germany and Belgium and arrived in Paris by way of Lille on the train. I exited Gare du Nord on the boulevard de Clichy on a Sunday morning, passed through Pigalle, and my disappointment was enormous! Paris looked dirty, ugly, miserable!

JPA: Were you expected in Paris?

JR: I was; I went right away to Simon Hantaï and his wife, who had come to France two years before me. Soon after, I moved into the La Ruche Studios thanks to a very dear painter friend, Antal Biro, and it was Pierre and Vera Székely who got me my first commission, a mural in a building, now gone, near the West Highway.

JPA: Was it through Hantaï that you met André Breton?

JR: Yes, but four years later. In May 1954, Hantaï invited Breton to visit my studio. That's where he saw one of my first paintings done in Paris, They Have Unquenchable Thirst for the Infinite, which was inspired by a Lautréamont poem. Breton was very much impressed, struck by the painting, and he wrote me a letter in which he confessed the great emotion he had felt in the presence of this image that seemed to capture Lautréamont. He immediately proposed organizing an exhibition for me, which I refused as I didn't feel ready. Also, Meret Oppenheim took me to Berggruen. In the gallery I saw Louis XV armchairs. I felt ill at ease; I no longer felt free. I preferred to stick to my tiny room of three and a half by four meters where I lived and worked during the fifties. Every day, I went to the meetings of the Surrealist group. In July, I read "L'amour fou" and I was so awed. Suddenly, I felt compelled to offer Unquenchable Thirst to Breton and he accepted it. (This, by the way, had a very surprising ending. Forty years after Breton's death, when the Musée national d'art moderne at the Centre Pompidou acquired the painting at the famous sale of his collection, his daughter sent me the full, and quite substantial, amount that she had received for it. (As she did to all the other artists involved, in the spirit of her father, thus saving my finances at the time.) In November, Breton once more proposed an exhibition

Unfolding (Deroulment), 1975, mixed media on canvas, 90 x 240 in (220 x 600 cm)

and I responded, "I am ready." It opened on the 19th of November at the Etoile Scellée. All the Surrealists came — Max Ernst passed by. In the gallery there was a small coal heater, and Ernst said, "I'm looking at the fire. I'm looking at Judit Reigl's paintings. They fit; it works." Among the fourteen paintings in the exhibition, there were only two figurative ones, Unquenchable Thirst and Incomparable Delight. The rest were abstract paintings done, since September of 1953, in full automatism, mental and physical.

JPA: How did the Surrealists view your abstract paintings?

JR: In a few I included organic forms that interested Breton. And in spite of his preference for figuration, he understood their value… but the contradiction was there.

JPA: Was automatism not the source of these abstract works?

JR: The automatism that I practiced was total, global. But the Surrealists in majority returned to imagery. I wanted to go beyond and beneath the dreams. In the beginning, with Hantaï's help, I tried to paint using curved blades, such as razors. It didn't work well. Later, on my own, I did better with a bent curtain rod that I bought at a flea market. Three months after the start of the exhibition, in December, I decided to leave the Surrealist group, and I wrote to Breton. The critic Charles Estienne who invited the Surrealists to show at the Kleber Gallery wanted to borrow Unquenchable Thirst along with a few newer works. But in this case I preferred not to give any; I couldn't show a painting that was already part of the past.

JPA: And Breton, did he understand your approach?

JR: I don't know. But he responded with a very thoughtful, sympathetic letter.

JPA: Who were the artists that you felt closest to?

JR: My friend, Antal Biro, often took me to the galleries: Drouin, Maeght, Loeb. There I saw, among others, Mathieu, Tanguy, Ernst, Duchamp. Matta profoundly touched me. I was struck by his large abstract paintings, the "cosmic" ones.

JPA: And the Americans?

JR: It was around 1955 that I started to hear about them at Drouin. Later, I showed with De Kooning, Kline and other American abstract expressionists in 1964 in New York, at the International Awards at the Guggenheim Museum, then in 1967-68 at the Carnegie Awards in Pittsburgh. For me, the school of Paris always remained foreign, stifling. My first exposure to Rothko, Newman, Still, and De Kooning felt like a deep breath. It was gratifying to discover, in the early sixties, the vast expanse of the abstract expressionists, which I paralleled. I may not be one of them but I feel close to them.

JPA: Then, at the Drouin Gallery, you showed with Degottex, Hantaï, Claude Georges, Mathieu, and Viseux, in an exposition titled Tensions. What brought you together?

JR: Mathieu was the most important for us. He painted on a large scale with the whole body, and favored quick execution.

JPA: How were your paintings executed?

JR: Without preconceptions: with both hands, walking towards the canvas, at times throwing paint from a distance; one canvas engendering the next, until in a few years it became a complete series.

JPA: And this is why the series is called Outburst?

JR: I felt that I was a center that had erupted, a trauma. This also corresponded to the break-up of Surrealism and strangely coincided with the start of the Hungarian uprising in Budapest in 1956.

JPA: Your next series is called Mass Writing. Why?

JR: Because the paint is laid on the canvas in large volumes, en masse. I bought some material used by masons: a black substance that dries slowly, from within, over years; this way I could work on six to eight canvases at a time. Starting with a white background, I applied globs of paint to the canvas with a rounded flexible blade or at times with a plain wooden rod, and I spread it upwards from the bottom to the top, using this black mass to cover the lighter colors laid underneath. I could see right away if I had succeeded or missed, and in the latter case, there was no possible correction. I used the rejected canvases to protect the studio floor. Destruction, by the way, is always integral to my work. Out of three or four thousand paintings, I may now have four or five hundred.

JPA: What is remarkable is how the pictorial volumes behave in space: they seem to be in movement.

JR: They are weightless and we do not know if they rise or fall. This "floating" remained constant in my work up to Unfolding, which I worked on between the years of 1974 and 1985.

JPA: In your writings you link your painting to the motion of the earth, of the cosmos…

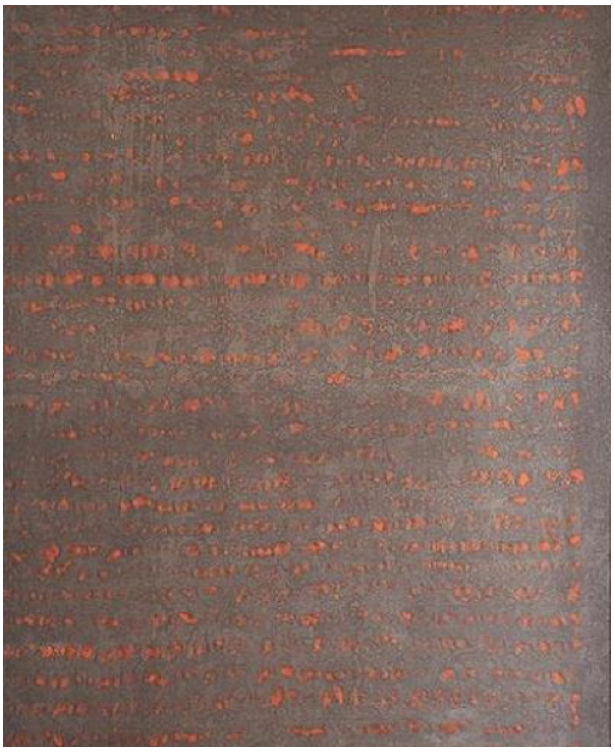
JR: Nothing is linked, it is the same! It passes through me. Heraclitus was right: "Ta Panta Rhei," which is to say, "Everything flows." I translated Unfolding from the Hungarian equivalent of the word, the root of which is "river" and means "ongoing movement."

JPA: So you felt the closest to Mathieu?

JR: Yes, but personally, I can't follow the movement in his later work. In the beginning, it was an electric charge. In 1953, one of his paintings, shown at Loeb, literally struck me: it was love at first sight.

JPA: After that, we come to the large formats…

JR: They got progressively larger… for example, a Surrealist work from February of 1954–now at the Musée national d'art moderneâ–measured about six by nine feet. I never had a studio sized to my liking. They were always too small. And maybe the rising and falling, the weightlessness, come from my wish to escape enclosure…



Unfolding (Deroulement), 1974, mixed media on canvas, 64 x 52 in (160 x 130 cm)

JPA: Does the Guano series (1958-65) derive from this?

JR: The Guano [paintings] evolved together with Mass Writing, starting in 1958. When I moved, I wanted to protect the new parquet floor, so I covered it with cast-off works from Mass Writing and Center of Dominance, which I walked over for years without giving it any further thought. They fossilized, and suddenly I saw them: the fallen excremental material became a marvel. One can associate these paintings with Dubuffet, in whom I was then very interested…

JPA: When did you exhibit this series?

JR: Jean Fournier, who directed the Kléber Gallery and showed my work from 1956 to 1962, presented a Guano at the Salon d'Automne in October 1962, but the first gallery to buy these works was Van de Loo in Munich, starting in 1958. That was tremendous. Thanks to René Drouin, I showed Outburst and Mass Writing in Munich, in Lausanne, and in a solo exhibition in Fribourg-en-Brisgau, Germany, over the course of the sixties. She also helped me participate in my first group show at a museum in Wiesbaden in 1957.

JPA: We should address one of the most important moments of your work, the arrival of the anthropomorphic figurations in your oeuvre, starting in 1966.

JR: It did not immediately dawn on me. When I started to sense this imperceptible presence I said, "Oh, but I don't want to do this…" So I tried to remain with the non-figuration that had been my daily domain for fifteen years. To my great and unwelcome surprise, it persisted. Finally, with time, I accepted, telling myself that "this thing must be very important for me; it has passed unperceived in front of my eyes, it was already present." I have realized, from the vague to the obvious, the same thing: Mass Writing had already become, in some way, the series that I much later called, as I had no preconceived plan in this direction, Man.

JPA: The figures that appear in 1966 are incomplete, they are torsos.

JR: They even told me that they were chopped or mutilated. Absolutely not; they are simply bigger than the canvas. They want to exceed it and they are exceeding it.

JPA: And the bodies seem to levitate in space.

JR: Not yet in 1966. They are standing up vertically, against the void, as an answer. After, they try to break loose, free themselves, fly. They make their presence felt.

JPA: And often they are male bodies.

JR: Yes, most of them, because they make an active stand against the void. They affirm their existence, their liberation. In my opinion, this is what is required. Though I think that art is at once masculine and feminine. Within these two polarities there is total balance and harmony. The female bodies appeared a bit later… without hierarchy.

JPA: Does the word "levitation" bother you in association?

JR: It comes later. You understand, first you have to stand up, fight, try to free yourself, and succeed at times, but also tumble and fail… and sometimes rise to achieve equilibriumâ?¯oh, how ephemeral and fleeting!

JPA: We think about other works in the history of art where the bodies also seem to be suspended in space…

JR: Of course, you can imagine unconscious references to Signorelli, to Michelangelo, to Tiepolo. This I can recognize and accept.

JPA: In this series, the bodies always appear nude, muscular, robust.

JR: To unchain yourself, you need physical force. That's why the legs and the arms are powerful. It all goes together, the mental and the physical.

JPA: The mental seems to be absorbed by the physical: bodies without faces.

JR: To bestow a face is to individualize. This is what I want to avoid, the personalization. Deep down the fundamental experience is not strictly human. It predates and goes beyond what is human.

JPA: This perhaps explains why you worked on this series for such a long time…

JR: For six years, from 1966 to 1972. Eight even, if you include Drape/Decoding, in which I transferred imprints of my anthropomorphic figures to very fine, almost transparent fabric.

JPA: And in spite of this, the series Man was almost never shown, except in 1999 at Beaulieu-en-Rouergue, in the south of France.

JR: Which I regret, for the understanding of my body of work. There is a coherence to my painting for more than fifty years now that no one could see, or, at least, very rarely.

JPA: Indeed, when you move to this new phase, you distance yourself very strongly from the abstract artists with whom you were showing. That could have caused some resentment.

JR: I could say, to be frank, that there was a great resistance on the part of the people who knew my earlier work, from the moment that they considered me a "figurative" artist. Bernard Ceysson, then director of the Museum of Modern Art of Saint-Etienne, did not even want to see my new paintings, though he liked Mass Writing. The art critics, the dealers, the curators — they wanted me to continue with what I did not want to do anymore. All the same, I could not go making paintings just to keep them happy!

JPA: From what moment did you perceive that this series was better accepted?

JR: It was never really accepted in France, where they totally misunderstood this evolution. In Germany and today in America, it seems to go over better.

JPA: Is it perhaps also because after this figurative phase you came back from Decoding to an abstract period?

JR: And yet it is one and the same! Even today France is still caught in this opposition of figuration-abstraction that I had to suffer.

JPA: And this new passage to abstraction in 1974 works itself through the experience of the Decoding series.

JR: Yes. Decoding corresponds to the imprint of my old paintings from the Man series that I covered and then picked up from the back of that fabric. I then showed, on the reverse side, the transferred image of the paint as it seeped through the cloth.

JPA: And this process based on an imprint will become, from 1974 to 1986, a constant in your work.

JR: The only constant is the experience of existence! If it has to be figurative, I accept it. If it becomes abstract, I accept it too. Drape/Decoding allowed me to escape the heavy shackles of Man. Then I had to say again, " I must free myself," and this all came naturally, organically, ontologically, from the very qualities of the pictorial matter, from the movement of my own body that became a plain instrument, allowing me a script as fluid as the canvas that bore it would permit, once more like the "flow of the river."

JPA: The Decoding series was realized without stretchers, on loose canvas.

JR: I was told that they were like veils, shrouds; they are very light imprints on semi-transparent cloth, like Indian saris.

JPA: And it was the paintings from Decoding that brought you to the Unfolding series in 1974.

JR: And Unfolding is, again, completely abstract, but

why not? There is no single way of life: the unicellular did become human, and from there, God only knows…

JPA: But this time you worked both sides of the canvas.

JR: I already started it in some ways in Decoding, but until then, in Decoding I had only shown the back of the canvas. In the Unfolding series, the paint that I apply in waves on one side of the canvas seeps through and appears instantly, as distinct particles, on the other. Think of the double nature of light, conforming at once to wave mechanics and to particle physics. This has always intrigued me, and one day when I was working it came to me: this is what I do!

JPA: But the realization of Unfolding was brand-new as you stapled the canvases to the walls of the studio and painted with a brush going along the walls.

JR: Not a brush! I always made my own instruments: I fashioned a kind of firm, compact sponge that I dipped in the paint, which allowed me to paint with both hands. Also, I often worked while listening to classical music… Johann Sebastian Bach is the source of the series that I titled The Art of the Fugue.

JPA: You arrived at a kind of cursive script…

JR: An undulating writing in thick enamel paint that I apply on one side appears dispersed on the back. Also, this greasy material is incompatible with the acrylic wash that I then spread over the other side of the fabric, this time mounted horizontally on a temporary stretcher. In this second phase the oily paint interacts with the acrylic in the way that duck feathers repel water. It is a struggle that takes place between the construction and destruction and gives, in the ultimate phase, the amazing result with the correct view of the painting.

JPA: This is, then, a kind of work in which you exploit the specific qualities of the materials.

JR: Exactly. Sometimes I keep at the same canvas until saturation. Method, for me, is fundamentally important, from buying the canvas — a roll of cotton cloth a hundred meters long and 2.40 meters high that I prepare myself as needed — to the choice of formats, paint, and the tools with which to paint. I would not touch a brush

Entrance/Exit (Entree/sortie), 1986, mixed media on canvas, 120 x 78 in (300 x 195 cm).

for forty years and now, oddly, I've come back to it.

JPA: From Outburst to Unfolding, the change is complete…

JR: For me, it is one and the same. High noon or sunset, it is the same sun.

JPA: But this time Unfolding interested a new generation of critics and artists.

JR: The writer and art theoretician, Marcelin Pleynet even wrote that he considers my whole oeuvre as a series belonging to Unfolding, anthropomorphic aspects included. By the way, another painter of my generation who goes back and forth between figuration and abstraction while changing his approach, materials, and techniques is Gerhard Richter.

JPA: Some, over the course of the seventies and eighties, would also link you to the painters of analytic abstraction.

By the way, between 1974 and 1985, Unfolding came to be multiplied by complementary series.

JR: For me, "analytic" has no meaning. My priority is the discovery, this experience of existence, the universal mode. The source of the series that came after Unfolding is also that of music and poetry, which is to say, the elementary gesture, rhythm, timing, pulse.

JPA: Outburst, Mass Writing and Unfolding share the gesture on the canvas…

JR: They share gesture and signâ?¯and most importantly, their partial disfiguration.

JPA: Could the sign itself be a limit?

JR: Life is construction and destruction; this is what my paintings reveal from the start. Degottex goes for deconstruction and disincarnation. For me the painting should simultaneously incarnate and obliterate itself. Unfolding is the ongoing act of finding the fixed source that would allow this contrary movement.

JPA: In 1988, the human figure returns, and the first series in which the body appears is called Facing. Is this a break?

JR: There is no break! The 1986 series Hydrogen, the last of Unfolding, seems to be buried under the layers of paint. They solidified into a wall that had to be breached. So I traced a kind of rectangular opening on the canvas that some called a door, and in this door appeared a human figure. Why? I have no idea. Because once more it wanted to come out of this door, out of this wall.

JPA: And this human figure is a silhouette.

JR: A silhouette that tries to fly away. How? By breaking down this door. This is how Entrance-Exit turned into Facing — because what I must face is myself.

JPA: If I understand well, this silhouette is in the painting because you are in the painting.

JR: I am at the same time the canvas, the painting, and the viewer looking at the painting. I am all of it together. These are the basic fundamentals that I search for.

JPA: As for the flying figures of the sixties, you mentioned Icarus. At times you use the name Lazarus.

JR: It is mostly you who used this name. It is an excellent term but it doesn't come from me. Pleynet also noted that I have on the wall of my studio a reproduction of the catacombs in Rome, showing someone beside a grave: this is Lazarus. I still have it.

JPA: What was the critical reaction to this new work?

JR: Very limited, as they didn't see any connection to the ensemble of my series.

JPA: That's why, in your exhibitions, you prefer now to associate the abstract with the figurative works, for example at the Pompidou Center in 1994 at the presentation of the Maurice Goreli Donationâ?¯your biggest Parisian collector. Also in Budapest, in 2005, at your Kunsthalle retrospective…

JR: Yes, that exhibition took place thanks in great part to the activity of Kálmán Makláry, my editor and dealer, who also exposed my paintings in various art fairs since then, in Paris, in Cologne, in Moscow. And the Janos Gat Gallery in New York presented my principal series in numerous successive exhibitions: in 2007, Outburst and Guano; in 2008, Mass Writings and Man; and now in 2009, Unfolding.

All images courtesy the artist and Janos Gat Gallery.