

Jill Newhouse Gallery presents and exhibition of works on paper by contemporary abstract artist **Gerard Mossé**.

Light Rising: Watercolors 1998-2000

On view October 29 – November 24

Tuesday – Friday 10-5 pm, Monday & Saturday by appointment

Essay by Michael Wolf

Paul Klee, experiencing the distinct quality of light in North Africa during a visit to Tunisia, once quipped, “*Color possesses me. I don’t have to pursue it. It will possess me always... Color and I are one. I am a painter.*”

It is an apt quote for the series of watercolors Gerard Mossé on view at Jill Newhouse Gallery.

Gerard Mossé was born in Casablanca, Morocco, but moved to Marseille at age 12 and later to Los Angeles. Like Klee, Matisse, and other artists, Mossé was strongly influenced by the intense light and vivid colors he encountered as a youth in North Africa, an influence that would leave a lasting impression on his work. In the 1970s, while studying painting in Los Angeles, Mossé apprenticed with ceramicist Michael Frimkess, whose work with Peter Voulkos helped establish ceramics as a fine art. Mossé went on to open his own ceramics studio before earning an MFA in painting from Claremont Graduate University. He moved to New York in 1987 specifically to paint but in 1998, he returned to ceramics to supplement his income, developing a line of designs manufactured in Toronto and later Portugal. As the business grew and increasingly consumed his time, Mossé felt disconnected from painting, describing the experience as “*if I was deprived of some of my senses, not fully alive.*” Seeking to reconnect with his painting practice, he began creating the watercolors in this exhibition, works which were all painted in New York over the three year period from 1998 to 2000.

The small scale and relatively pared down process that went into making these watercolors allowed Mossé to work without the space and elaborate set-up that would have been required for painting in oil. But Mossé explains that completing these watercolor paintings was not a quick process; each one was developed over a period of several weeks. Part of the challenge lay in the nature of the medium itself:

watercolor paint is essentially pigment suspended in a binder that adheres the pigment to the paper. Unlike acrylic and oil paint, watercolor does not simply dry and become permanent; once dry, it can be reactivated with water. It is this property which makes watercolor very complicated to layer, as a previous layer can be lifted from the paper if not handled carefully. In fact, if too much pigment is disturbed or complementary colors are layered together, they can mix and become muddy. The paintings in *Light Rising* are created by building up thin layers of different watercolor pigments, allowing Mossé to create new colors through their interaction. Working in this way also allows light to pass through the translucent layers of paint, reflect off the white paper beneath, and return to the viewer's eye. The result is a luminosity and depth that would be difficult to achieve with an opaque medium.

A visit to the 13th-century Gothic chapel Sainte-Chapelle in Paris also had a profound effect on Mossé. Sainte-Chapelle is known for its impossibly thin, soaring Gothic stone arches and stunning stained-glass windows. A number of the paintings in this series *Light Rising* recall the way light passes through stained glass, projecting color onto a wall or floor and combining to create new colors. The mixing of colored light is an additive process, while the mixing of pigments is subtractive. With light, combining the primary colors produces white; with artist pigments, combining the primary colors produces a dark color approaching black. Mossé's understanding of this fundamental difference is evident in the masterful way he mixes and layers color throughout the series. The paintings in this group including *Untitled, 6539* and *Untitled, 6573*, which are dominated by circular shapes, recall the way light is projected through stained-glass windows, creating dappled patterns of color on the floor or walls. Although Mossé says he does not like to use the words "spiritual" or "transcendent", the paintings nonetheless have an otherworldly glow. Their shapes radiate from within, creating the impression that light is emanating from the paper.

In addition to sharing Paul Klee's experience of living in North Africa, Mosse's work also has a visual connection to the paintings Klee created following his first visit to Tunisia in 1914. It was after returning from this trip that Klee completed *In the Style of Kairouan*, his first abstract, nonobjective painting. Like Mosse's paintings in the exhibition, it is a watercolor on an intimate scale. Klee's composition is constructed from rectangular blocks of color with circles dispersed throughout. However, while Klee confines each color within hard-edged shapes, Mosse allows the transparency of watercolor to subtly overlap the forms, creating delicate transitions between colors. Klee's approach can be understood as part of a broader progression in modern painting that began with Paul Cézanne, whose paintings broke objects and landscapes

into planes and facets. Cézanne's approach profoundly influenced the development of Cubism and ultimately earned him the title "the father of modern art." Seen within this lineage, Klee's work provides an interesting historical and formal point of connection to Mosse's paintings.

Light Rising: Watercolors 1998-2000 is as much about the experience of seeing as it is about color. Mossé's paintings transform the simple materials of pigment, water, and paper into something that appears to glow from within. The influences that shaped his work, from the intense light of North Africa to the stained-glass windows of Sainte-Chapelle, come together through his thoughtful process of layering and mixing color. While the paintings are rooted in the physical properties of watercolor, their luminous surfaces evoke something beyond the material. They offer a moment of stillness in which light and color seem to transcend the limitations of the small sheet of paper, creating a quiet, contemplative experience.