

Edward Waisnis, "Le Retour de Roger-Edgar Gillet à New York," *Whitehot Magazine*,  
February 16, 2025



## Le Retour de Roger-Edgar Gillet à New York



*Roger-Edgar Gillet, "Les Demoiselles", 1971, oil on cardboard mounted on canvas, 52.25 x 77.75 inches (133 x 187.5 cm.) Photo: © Bertrand Huet / tutti image Courtesy of the Estate of Roger-Edgar Gillet and Petzel, New York*

By **EDWARD WAISNIS** February 16, 2025

Roger-Edgar Gillet's recollections of when he was a boy and seeing workers pouring tar on the street and bakers kneading dough established proclivities early in his development. These impressions grasped his sensibilities, cropping up in a statement later in life: "For me, painting is foremost matter."\* After a sideline as a decorator, and a formative visit to the United States in the mid-fifties, Gillet moved into working within the constraints of the Second School of Paris,

# Petzel

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befitting his accrued inclinations; creating abstractions under the banner of Informalism in which material (and technique) held sway over subject. Akin to the career of Philip Guston (curiously, there are several intersecting points) Gillet followed an extensive body of work with a shift to unique figuration. It is from this period that the exhibition draws. Specifically, 1969–1996, with the main thrust covering the seventies and the bookending works providing an example from the transition and one of Gillet's 'portraits' executed less than a decade before his death in 2004, respectively.

Comprised of a mere half-dozen paintings, laid out in jewel-box of a chamber, this is a curatorial achievement in a minor (but resonant and important) key, mainly by dint of the high standard of the selection. Coming upon this show provided a respite from the usual Chelsea fare—that often confounds, beseeches, or screeches—with an offering of introspection of a near religious fervor.

The froth and tumult of the post-war era are given a distinctive European twist, evinced by response to having experienced the rampant upending of civilized society close to home, that becomes a driving catalyst. The characteristics can be enumerated as biomorphic corpuscles, seemingly referencing the terror of the Shoah, usually rendered in visual earth tones; examples range from the work of Jean DuBuffet to that of Zoran Music.

# Petzel

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*Roger-Edgar Gillet, "Les Adieux de la Grande Duchesse", 1971, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 39.31 x 58.81 x 1.56 inches (100 x 149.5 x 4 cm.) Photo: © Bertrand Huet / tutti image Courtesy of the Estate of Roger-Edgar Gillet and Petzel, New York*

*Les Adieux de la Grande Duchesse*, 1971, the sole work in an azure timber, with a scene suitable to the age of the Louis' put through the sieve of satire. The vogue of that great observer of the undercurrents of character and polite society, Honore Daumier, is evoked, all the while with full cognizance of Francisco Goya and James Ensor's achievements of observation is evident. Contemporary lineage exists in the paintings of both Carol Dunham and George Condo, who have absorbed the cross-pollination of Pop in their revivals. Gillet's atmospheric pentimenti eschews such stark delineation, opting in favor of rich atmospherics.

Gillet's politics are submerged, largely by the dignity of his approach to brush wielding, topicality bubbles up in the costume of humanism. This sort of classicism is found in the friezes of Leon Golub as well.

The angst and fright in Gillet's figures are countered by a sense of whimsical pathos, surfacing a tragicomic mood similar to the quality that can be found in the persona of Chaplin's little tramp. Elevating from the guffaw to the grand gestures of high culture.

# Petzel

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*Roger-Edgar Gillet, "Les voueurs", 1975, oil on paper mounted on canvas, 73.75 x 118 inches (187.3 x 299.7 cm.)  
Photo: Jason Mandella Courtesy of the Estate of Roger-Edgar Gillet and Petzel, New York*

On the scope of a vast historical epic *Les voueurs*, 1975, with immediate reflections of Goya, utilizes grisaille effectively, silvery, silver-gray, slate, charcoal. My memory of coming upon John Singer Sargent's *El Jaelo* of 1882 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, summoned a similar sense of awe, utilizing centrifugal tumult set off by the dramatic dusky light. The epidermis of a paper (other works utilize cardboard) on which it has been painted supplements the ethereal encapsulation by lending a depth of pearly translucent patina.

Riffing, in a sense, on Picasso, *Les Demoiselles*, 1971, focuses on a grouping of fungoid figures reminiscent of the surrealism of Roberto Matta, in both form and hues, and painted on a cardboard ground that contributes a warm buff sheen.

# Petzel

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*Roger-Edgar Gillet, "Untitled", 1996, oil on canvas, 31.5 x 25.25 inches (80 x 64.1 cm.) Photo: Thomas Barratt,  
Courtesy of the Estate of Roger-Edgar Gillet and Petzel, New York*

Untitled, 1996, an easel-scaled canvas, a late example of one of Gillet's portraits, offers fore-square head and shoulders forms in ghostly streaked and scraped umber and ochre, proffering a whiff of Gustave Courbet's impasto. The visage obliteration strikes a note found with the tropes of horror and Sci-Fi stories and films; think, featureless monster or faceless dystopian plebeian. The deep Existential strain and ominous pitch—something wicked this way comes—is established in deference to a devotional tableau.

# Petzel

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The exhibition is completed by two works respondent to still life with frothy paint handling and opting for a palette that introduces rosy shades. *Les Homards*, 1969, showcasing an abundant pile of the titular lobsters is redolent of Dutch masters, Chaïm Soutine’s abattoirs, as well as Francis Bacon’s splayings. While *Nature morte aux cotelettes*, 1980, in its blocky forms brings to mind the compositional leanings of Giorgio Morandi as well as (once again) Philip Guston, all held by an environment executed as though by a master patisserie.

It is the quality of thoughtful soulfulness, revealing our collective existence, that makes Gillet’s work captivating and emotionally stirring.

Like other art historical ‘seconds’—Larry Rivers-to-Andy Warhol/Roy Lichtenstein; Philip Guston-to-Jackson Pollock; Pierre Soulages-to-Franz Kline—Gillet, together with his compatriots (from Jean Fautrier to Nicholas de Steäl) often come to rival, or even exceed, their antecedents. Furthermore, adding time and reassessment, are being recast in a new, more favorable, light. Whether you are interested in painting of yesterday, today or tomorrow I would urge you to see this exhibition.

\* Roger-Edgar Gillet, “La Matière et le geste: interview d’Alexis Pelletier en 1998” (“Matter and Gesture: Interview with Alexis Pelletier in 1998”), galerie Guigon, 2006, as cited in the galleries Press Release.

† From the gallery Press Release: “In 1962, Gillet began a series of portraits titled “Apostles” (“Apôtres”), in which faces are faintly suggested. Rather than religious allusion, Gillet’s ‘apostles’ nod to a lineage of classical thinkers and fellow painters. Forty-five years later, he took this theme up again with around forty portraits, each whose contours were more defined, but whose features, and sometimes their gaze, were obliterated by the material. “

**Roger-Edgar Gillet: *Dinner Party***  
**Petzel**  
**520 West 25th Street, New York**  
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