

## Norman Bluhm

(Chicago, Illinois, 1920 — East Wallingford, Vermont, 1999)

European and American culture intertwine throughout Norman Bluhm's career. In the 1950s, the artist began establishing a dialogue between the art historical tradition and the power of gestural expression. Thus the label of Abstract Expressionism generally associated with his work relates only to one aspect of his art, but does not fully encompass his cultural itinerary as a whole. Born in the United States and raised in Florence, Italy, Bluhm returned to his native city of Chicago in the 1940s in order to study architecture with Mies van der Rohe.

During the war he was a pilot and the sense of space and velocity he experienced would later find expression in his work. Returning to Europe, he settled in Paris, where he lived from 1947 to 1956. Following a pattern that would continue in subsequent years, Bluhm left Paris in the mid-50s to move to New York. In Manhattan he became close with the artists and poets involved in the climate of renewal and played an active role in the debates then in progress. Both pieces in the collection belong to a group of works painted in New York. In *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1959, the artist expresses energy through the novelty of American gestural language and European memories tied to places and images. The pictorial surface is traversed by broad brushstrokes of color. The dynamic force of the encounter between pictorial material and the support extends to the numerous characteristic paint drippings. The vivid tones seem to convey the magic of the stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals, which Bluhm's works frequently bring to mind. The artist seems to confirm the importance of light in his choice of title. He cites a well-known work that Rembrandt painted around 1635, which depicts the moment where the pagan feast held by Belshazzar, King of Babylon, was suddenly disturbed by the appearance of a divine hand writing a dire message on the wall. Mindful of the patches of light that characterize Rembrandt's work, Bluhm illuminates his painting with the presence of solar colors, yellow and orange, which are in turn illuminated by powerful brushstrokes dipped in pure white.

The importance of drawing is always present in Bluhm's work. In the triptych *Chariot*, 1965, the gesture is characterized by strong angulations, almost as if following an inner drawing that lends architectural structure to the work. The large proportions of the triptych make the choice of color — limited to a palette of just black, yellow, and white — even more precise. (MB)