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## Art review: 'Perpetual Motion: Michael Goldberg' at Cal State University, Long Beach

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For the last century and a half, art movements have followed hot on the heels of one another faster and more furiously than ever before. Even a quick list is dizzying, taking readers from Impressionism to Fauvism and Expressionism, onto Cubism, Dada and Surrealism, and then to Pop, Minimalism and Conceptualism, among scores of other schools and styles.

Only once has a movement had the misfortune of bearing the same name as its predecessor, qualified by a term with all the glamour of "previously owned automobiles," otherwise known as used cars. Being called a second-generation Abstract Expressionist is about as bad as it gets if your goal is to reject the movement that preceded yours and to stake out some artistic territory all your own.

In a world increasingly obsessed with newness-and increasingly impatient with history-second-generation Abstract Expressionism has come to mean second-rate. Its artists, Michael Goldberg, Norman Bluhm, Sam Francis, Alfred Leslie and Joan Mitchell, are generally thought of as playing second-fiddle to such luminaries as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Willem De Kooning and Barnett Newman.

At Cal State University Long Beach, "Perpetual Motion: Michael Goldberg" invites visitors to rethink all of this. The smartly selected survey also goes a long way in laying to rest the idea that avant-garde art is intrinsically antagonistic toward its precedents, not to mention the general public.

Organized by museum director Chris Scoates and assistant curator Elizabeth Anne Hanson, the engaging exhibition is concise and satisfying, as straightforward, no-nonsense and out of step with business as usual as Goldberg's best paintings, which make up the majority of its 31 works on canvas and paper, painted from 1949-2006.

Rather than argue that Goldberg (1924-2007) is an underrated genius whose art is on par with the century's established standouts, the exhibition does something more reasonable and ambitious: suggest that great art need not be based in the rejection of its immediate forebears-that building upon previous achievements, via refinement and eloquent elaboration, can be as productive and potent as fighting against them.

Today, with public debate more divisive than it has been in generations, it is inspiring to see Goldberg's works. His vigorous, gestural abstractions, which range from page-size to mural-scale, are all about dialogue, reaching out, building bridges and carrying on conversations-some subtle, others loud, but all charged with passion and dedicated to the highest level of human civility.

That is not to say that Goldberg's paintings are easy or agreeable. They are rugged and rambunctious, rough around the edges, riddled with doubt and shot-through with conflict. They do not suffer fools. Their pleasures are hard won.



They have no room for secrets, pretense, or guile. Goldberg's blue-collar abstractions lay everything on their surfaces, fully visible to anyone who looks closely. To pay attention to the moves Goldberg made when he painted is to watch a consciousness in action-to see a mind struggling with messy materials to get them to sing in ways unexpected and thrilling.

Not one work resembles another. The center gallery features five big canvases. The earliest two, both untitled and from the early 1950s, are among a handful of tentative works, their compositions and palettes lacking the wild dynamics of Goldberg's signature pieces, which include "Madame Recamier" (1956-57), "Duomo" (1959) and "Rauch Hill" (1960). These

three knockouts show Goldberg at his best, lashing together architectural solidity and explosive instability, often with ferocious intensity.

That dynamic, of constructing a stable structure and then obliterating it, animates all of Goldberg's paintings. Some, like "Greasy Spoon" (1960) and "The Blue Square" (1963) evoke ruins, fragments and melancholic reflections. Others, like the three small collages from 1962, all titled "Dear Diary (Untitled)" are as lyrical and carefree as the happiest summer escapade. Other paintings are emotional roller coasters, some of their passages conveying disdain, disgust and frustration, while others serving up serendipitous instants of good luck, wonder and delight.

In the 1980s and '90s, Goldberg often laid down thick swathes of paint and then scraped them off with wide palette knives. The ghostly stains left behind are evidence of both dissatisfaction and an unwillingness to settle for it. (An exhibition in Los Angeles, at Manny Silverman Gallery, fleshes out this phase of Goldberg's oeuvre.)

All of his works have so much conflict built into their competing forms and self-canceling swipes that they do not need to compete with their predecessors. Instead, Goldberg's tautly tormented paintings draw viewers into ongoing dramas that are as resonant today as the moment they were made.

--David Pagel

("Perpetual Motion: Michael Goldberg," University Art Museum, California State University, Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, (562-985-4299, through Dec. 12. Closed Mondays. [www.csulb.edu/uam](http://www.csulb.edu/uam))

Images: Top, Michael Goldberg, "Bowery Days;" Bottom Spannocchia--NY IV." Credit for both: Courtesy of University Art Museum, Cal State University, Long Beach