

Jack Boul. Perceptual Painting

# Jack Boul:

## PERCEPTUAL PAINTING

American University Museum

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# Jack Boul: Perceptual Painting

June 15 – August 11, 2024

American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center

Washington, DC

Curated by Jack Rasmussen

## FOREWORD

Jack Boul was born in Brooklyn in 1927, the child of Russian and Romanian parents. After serving with the US occupational forces in Italy, Boul used the GI Bill to attend the Cornish School of Art in Seattle, graduating in 1951, and then moving to Washington to continue his studies at American University. In 1969 he joined a tight-knit AU faculty that had taught together at The Phillips Gallery School during the war and then moved to the American University campus to create one of the very first graduate programs in painting. Inspired by the Post-Impressionists to be found so close at hand in The Phillips Collection, AU's faculty brought the values of perceptual painting forward to another generation.

Eric Denker, former curator of prints at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, has written frequently about Boul's artistic process and *oeuvre*. He has observed that Boul preferred to work in the presence of his motif but avoided extraneous details. Boul would share this quote from Eugène Delacroix with his students: "I only began to do something of value after I had forgotten enough small details to recall the really poetic and striking aspects. Until then I was plagued by an infatuation for accuracy which most people mistakenly identify for truth." As is made clear by Denker's writing, the work presented here in *Jack Boul: Perceptual Painting* charges us with the responsibility to transcend the appearance of things, to search for more universal truths.

While Boul is justly famed for his etchings and monoprints, *Jack Boul: Perceptual Painting* focuses on his accomplishments as a painter and on his influence as a teacher. Three former students were invited to write here about Boul's importance to their own work and education as artists: Jo Weiss, Sharon Wolpoff, and Susan Yanero. Boul's colleague Rebecca Carr, Program Manager of Conversations at The Kreeger Museum and Lecturer in Philosophy at The George Washington University, was also invited to write about Boul from her personal and institutional perspective. The students, faculty, and friends of American University are indebted to the family of Jack Boul for making this exhibition and publication possible.

Jack Rasmussen, PhD  
C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director  
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center  
Washington, DC

Opposite: Jack Boul, *Paris Apartment*, 2010. Oil on canvas, 7 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *Two Cows*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 5.25 x 3.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.

## Seeing Jack Boul's Paintings

Several months ago, I watched Jack begin his little painting with a greenish line drawn just above the middle of the small canvas; he had beside him a photograph of a field of cows. We know he painted certain subjects repeatedly, cows being one of them. We know he eliminated details and specifics; they fade, left unrepresented. We know his canvases are agreeable in subject and small in size. We know they arrest the viewer, beckon a long second look.

To be in Jack's presence is to be in a calm and quiet space. One might be running from the car to be on time to see him, but one certainly slows down when touching his hand or following him to his studio. His paintings slow one down, too. We feel what we don't take time to feel, we register what we only glance at, we experience something significant that we rush past as insignificant. We come to remember an aliveness that our lively lives subtract away.

Jack's studio is filled, absolutely filled, with paintings and monotypes. They lean against one another in open boxes on the floor or on special shelving on the walls, grouped by the subjects that he was drawn to again and again. They hang around the room keeping company with all sorts of eclectic objects. Why are there so many, why are there so many on the same subject? Why can't Jack stop painting cows or a woman in a chair or a cafe scene?

Philosophers for hundreds of years distinguished appearances from reality. Things may

appear a certain way, but that is not the way they really are. The essence of a thing is what a thing really is; its essence captures its truth which transcends its being in a particular time and particular space. But Nietzsche's aphorisms and Darwin's influential theory of evolution challenged the meaningfulness of such ideas as **the** essence or **the** truth...species are always changing, modifying themselves and their environment. They have no one essence; they are ever changing. Can there be one truth, one essence, one reality, one self? No, we are many selves; there are many truths; there are an infinite number of perspectives to be had.

For Jack, there seem to be endless essences, endless poetic qualities, endless emotional resonances to be elicited from a scene that looks much the same to the uninterested eye. Jack opens us all to the possibility of multiple expressions, multiple ways of seeing. Our seeing has lost its aesthetic dimensions; we see only to recognize, catalogue, identify. In doing so, we miss the qualities of seeing itself...how it feels, its expressive richness, its joyfulness, its meaning that language cannot capture. Jack's numerous paintings on the same subject and the fact that he doesn't like to give titles to his work point to something. The paintings open us to his aesthetic space that is about the infinite possibilities of seeing. We experience Jack seeing in his paintings; we, too, may learn to see for ourselves.

**REBECCA CARR**

Program Manager of Conversations, The Kreeger Museum  
Lecturer in Philosophy, The George Washington University

# ALCHEMY

One of the few required classes in my MFA program was called “Materials & Techniques,” and just as the name suggests, this was a rich and comprehensive examination of the paraphernalia with which we worked. It was my good fortune that my professor for this class was Jack Boul, who, by virtue of this class, taught me how to expand my skill set to include alchemist, as well as artist. I’ve been told that when I’m asked what time it is, I tend to tell you how to build a clock. I love details and nuances, so this class that revealed the inner workings of my art supplies was heaven to me. I like to know what makes things tick.

Grad school was a steady stream of studio art classes and art history courses. In addition to time spent in class under the watchful eyes of professors such as Ben Summerford, Bob D’Artista and Helene Herzbrun, we were each encouraged to establish our own independent studio practice. We weren’t just refining our art making skills, we were becoming equipped to be artists out in the world. Most of us approached art as a calling rather than a choice, and Mr. Boul recognized within each of us this reverence, although we often masked it as ambition or bravado.

His classroom was a place where we learned by doing. He helped us to gain a greater understanding of the materials and methods we took for granted as we learned how to utilize the art supplies at our fingertips to better express ourselves. We learned how oil paint was made by grinding the pigment, adding the oil, then sealing

the tube once the freshly made paint had been deposited within. We made gesso; we cooked rabbit skin glue; we learned about the realm of varnishes and the multiplicity of canvas options. We learned the arcane practice of painting with egg tempera.

All the while, Mr. Boul saw to it that class time overflowed with practical advice. For example, his paintings were often offered, several at a time, to show how the use of particular paints, mediums and brushes supported the immediacy of his images. We were privy to how he made discernment a part of his process. Applying this approach to my own work, I describe it as structured freedom. In other words, carefully selecting and preparing the materials prior to actually beginning to paint helps to provide the groundwork for the burst of creative freedom that will follow.

From this precious time with Mr. Boul, I acquired so much more than just a greater understanding of the materials and techniques that enable me to do my work. I learned that it was crucial for me to get my information from real life when making art. I learned what it meant to attend to the presiding spirit of a place or the telling gesture within an interaction. I learned how to be present in order to receive the magic of a first impression.

A relentless teacher, he taught by example. A kind friend, he sought to empower the young artists in his charge. A remarkably gifted artist – I am grateful to have been his student.

**SHARON WOLPOFF**

MFA, American University, 1981





Sharon Wolpoff, *Brunch at Black Market*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 44 x 62 in.



Susan Yanero, *Basement*. Oil and collage on linen, 60 x 53 in. Courtesy of The Washington Studio School.

## Light as Content

I have known Jack Boul for many years. First as a student at American University and later as a fellow teacher at the Washington Studio School. He is a very important artist.

He is the master of many media, including drawing, painting, printmaking and sculpture. His work is small in scale but large in content. I remember him once commenting on the size of his work. He said he had served in World War II and knew the atrocities of war. He wanted to make his work a size that he could pack up quickly in a suitcase if he had to leave in a hurry.

Jack works mostly from life. He is a perceptual painter whose vision is brought about by his sensitivity to pictorial form. He paints not in detail but in shapes of values of light, medium and dark, and color. The shapes are often gestural, moving over the surface rhythmically, meeting together here to form the volume of a face or body, building, animal; there to be the plane on which these things stand or an area of sky that both moves back in space three-dimensionally and also holds the space two-dimensionally on the surface of the canvas or paper. The values work together to pick out the character of things, the individuality.

His compositions are elegant, usually based on the golden section. He taught students to be very aware of composition, saying to be sure to

vary the spaces within the composition so they are not regular and therefore without life. Often I've heard him say, "There's a certain sameness in this division," and then measure with his fingers and say, "See! One, two, three."

In his ways of his dealing with shape and space, I see a similarity between his work and the early figurative work of Richard Diebenkorn, and also further back to Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis, Paul Gauguin and further still to the early Renaissance work of Piero della Francesca.

Jack's work always holds together so beautifully. The figures work together so beautifully with maybe one or more coming out into the light. His still files are never banal. He elevates everything, has tremendous respect for life. Among my favorite works of his are his works with animals, especially his herds of cows. He seems to see them as one beautiful unit; one sharing spots with another, others sharing gestures, the light picking out their amazing beauty. The sky often so blue. And they all move as one unit, lit within and without. Maybe this is how he sees humanity: all of us moving together, all of us fabricated under one light source. An amazing light source is the poetry of his work; light is his content.

I feel very fortunate to know Jack Boul. He is an amazing artist and a wonderful person.

**SUSAN YANERO**

MFA, American University, 1978

## Jack Boul: Poetry

Jack Boul's impact on the AU art program while I was there in the late '70s/early '80s was discernible in his dedication to the discipline of painting and studio culture. With a noble carriage undistracted by the activity of students working at their easels, he looked deep in thought while keenly observant.

It wasn't just the exercises he had for his students, it was the desire to express the potential to be found in each arrangement, mostly figures set in intimate scenes. I could see into the studio, while walking past, the dramatic lighting elevating quotidian events to poetic heights.

Using examples from Rembrandt, Camille Corot, Édouard Vuillard and other great paintings of the past, Jack illustrated the language of how to make a painting. Conversations with fellow students recalled his comments on composition and the use of value relationships to draw the most from an arrangement and expand students' awareness of expression through structure.

After his tenure at AU, we at the Washington Studio School were fortunate to have him continue his tradition of gentle yet directed teaching. Everyone who worked with Jack carries with them valuable and valued visions of art.



Jo Weiss, *Self portrait 2*, 2024. Conte, 5 x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist.

**JO WEISS**

MFA, American University, 1986







Jack Boul

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Perceptual  
Painting



Jack Boul, *NY Rooftops*,  
1964. Oil on canvas,  
23.25 x 17.25 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.









Jack Boul, *Reflections*,  
1998. Oil on canvas,  
19.25 x 13 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Rooftops*, 1964.  
Oil on canvas, 10.75 x 8.25 in.  
Courtesy of Tom O'Briant and  
David Boul.





Jack Boul, *Two Figures in a Café*, 1990. Oil on canvas, 5.5 x 5.75 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Nude*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 4.5 x 6.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Chicago Alley*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 4.25 x 6.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *Chicago Underpass*, 1990. Oil on canvas, 9 x 7.75 in. Courtesy of Tom O'Briant and David Boul.



Jack Boul, *Vivian*, 1992. Oil on canvas, 6 x 8 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Three Figures*, 1982. Oil on canvas, 5.5 x 3.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Three Figures Sewing*, 1985. Oil on canvas, 10.5 x 6.75 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *Flamenco Dancer*, 2013. Oil on canvas, 19.25 x 15.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.  
Opposite: Jack Boul, *Self Portrait*, 1965. Oil on canvas, 7.5 x 9.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.









Jack Boul, *Moving Clouds*, 1967.  
Oil on canvas, 11.5 x 9.5 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *C&O Canal I*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 14.5 x 11.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *C&O Canal II*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 14.25 x 11.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Cows*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 13.5 x 5 in. Courtesy of Tom O'Briant and David Boul.





Jack Boul, *Green and Black 1*, 1972. Oil on canvas, 6 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Field with Clouds*, 1994. Oil on canvas, 6.25 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Beach Waves*, 2005. Oil on canvas, 8.5 x 5.5 in. Courtesy of Tom O'Briant and David Boul.







Jack Boul, *Wildflowers*, 1998. Oil on canvas, 8.75 x 7.5 in. Courtesy of Tom O'Briant and David Boul.



Jack Boul, *Rolling Hills*, 2009. Oil on canvas, 6 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Smokestack*, 1999. Oil on canvas, 11.5 x 6.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *Gist Avenue*, n.d.  
Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *White Smock*, n.d.  
Oil on canvas, 4 x 7.75 in.  
Courtesy of the artist.





Jack Boul, *Florentine Memories*, 1976. Oil on canvas, 3.5 x 4.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



Jack Boul, *Artists Studio*, 1965.  
Oil on canvas, 20.5 x 16.5.  
Courtesy of the artist.



## BIOGRAPHY

Jack Boul was born in 1927 and grew up in the South Bronx, the son of a Russian émigré father and a Romanian mother. He attended the American Artist's School in New York, before serving in the US Army as part of the US occupational forces in and around Pisa, Italy. Boul graduated from the Cornish School of Art in 1951. Later that year he moved to the Washington metropolitan area to study at American University.

In 1957, Boul received his first solo showing, at the Franz Bader Gallery, attracting positive reviews that cited him as a promising young artist. In 1960, he had a one-man show at the Watkins Gallery at American University where later he began to teach in 1969. During his fifteen years as a professor of art at American University, Boul showed regularly at the Watkins Gallery. He had his first museum exhibition in 1974 at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

In 1984, after fifteen years teaching at American University, Boul became one of the first faculty members of the new Washington Studio School. During ten years of teaching painting, drawing, and monotype, he had annual one-man shows in the Courtyard Gallery of the Studio School where he continues regularly to show today. In 1986, Boul was part of a two-person exhibition that included the work of the late Washington artist Peter DeAnna, organized by the Mint Museum in Charlotte, North Carolina, and later shown at the University of Maryland in College Park. In addition he contributed to numerous area group exhibitions, most prominently with eight oil paintings in the traveling show *Still Working: Under Known Artists of Age in America* shown locally at The Corcoran Gallery of Art. He retired from the Washington Studio School in 1994 to devote his time to printmaking and painting.

In 2000, Boul had a one-man show at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, *Intimate Impressions: Monotypes and Paintings by Jack Boul*, and in 2014, the National Gallery of Art acquired several of Boul's works. In 2017, Stanford University's Art Gallery in Washington featured a retrospective of Boul's work in an exhibition titled *Jack Boul at 90*. In 2017, and again in 2019, the Phillips Collection added Boul's paintings, monotypes and sculpture to its collection. The San Francisco Fine Arts Museums acquired two of Boul's monotypes in 2019.

Boul's work can be seen on his website [www.jackboul.com](http://www.jackboul.com) or on Instagram @Jackboulartist.



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Cover: Jack Boul, *C&O Canal II* (detail), 1972. Oil on canvas, 14.25 x 11.25 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Back Cover: Jack Boul, *Artist's Work Table*, 1974. Oil on canvas, 15.5 x 19.5 in. Courtesy of the artist.



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