

## ARTFORUM

REVIEWS PARIS

### Roger-Edgar Gillet

Galerie Nathalie Obadia | Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré

By Mara Hoberman ☞



Roger-Edgar Gillet, *Grand orchestre*, 1978, oil on canvas, 30 3/4 × 82 1/4".

Roger-Edgar Gillet (1924–2004) emerged in the 1950s in Paris with encrusted abstractions made of oil paint mixed with pebbles, sand, and glue. His early work attracted the attention of art informel champion Michel Tapié, who included it in his seminal 1952 exhibition and catalogue, “*Un Art Autre*” (Art of Another Kind), alongside paintings by the likes of Karel Appel, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, and Pierre Soulages. Three years later, while visiting New York, Gillet made an abrupt stylistic change. Surprisingly, it was not the buzz around Abstract Expressionism that inspired him, but a painting he saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—an El Greco portrait, *Cardinal Fernando Niño de Guevara*, ca. 1600, whose subject Gillet described as “wearing tiny glasses” and a “cruel gaze.” It was this encounter that prompted his decisive and unfashionable pivot toward figuration.

# Petzel

Mara Hoberman, “Roger-Edgar Gillet,” *Artforum*, November 2024.

The recent exhibition of Gillet’s work, “*Une figuration autre*,” celebrated the artist’s mature work with a selection of sixteen portraits and genre scenes made between 1966 and 1989. While the show’s title referenced Tapié’s historic show, the paintings themselves, presented on the occasion of the artist’s centennial, appeared almost uncannily contemporary. Now on trend, Gillet’s grotesque faces and bodies begged comparisons to Miriam Cahn or Genieve Figgis, whose paintings similarly revel in materiality at the expense of verisimilitude. Using heavy brushstrokes, Gillet built a vision of corporeality that was also an ode to paint itself.

Proving the palpable link he created between his medium and subject matter, terms related to viscosity, texture, and moisture are necessary to describe his liquescent figures and faces. The half-dozen quasi-portraits on view bore reduced features that often verged on scatological blobs and smears. A man in a red cloak clasping his hands (*Un juge rouge* [A Red Judge], 1977) recalls the El Greco portrait, not to mention Francis Bacon’s papal portraits after Velázquez. Rendered in glistening oils, the judge’s face—just the vaguest suggestion of beady black eyes and a downturned red smear for a mouth—appears to be melting into or sliding right off his misshapen head. Other slippery undefined visages composed (just barely) of fluid strokes conveyed a similar otherworldliness that confounded portraiture’s traditional role. Rather than identifying a particular person at a specific time and place, Gillet’s subjects and their surroundings are so approximate they become universal.

A desire to depict humanity generally rather than particular humans was even more apparent in group scenes of villagers and orchestras wherein multiple bodies appeared to melt into one another and bleed into their shared landscape background. Gillet’s depictions of interconnected bodies floating in metaphorical seas of muddy earth tones afford little distinction between the materiality of such diverse compositional elements as bodies, sky, land, buildings, and musical instruments. *Grand orchestre*, 1978, which recalls the faceless musicians Nicolas de Staël painted in the 1950s, could easily be misread as a landscape. Perhaps precisely because they are so hard to parse, Gillet’s frothy ensembles convey a powerful feeling of harmony.

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As that and other works on view presaged, Gillet veered back toward abstraction late in his career. The latest work presented, *Siège d'une ville* (Siege of a City), 1988–89, was the most abstract in the show and the best example of the artist's *figuration autre*. Here, sketchy figures seen from behind appeared within a stepped landscape devastated by fires and smoke in the distance. Recalling paintings by another contemporary giant, Anselm Kiefer, whose landscapes of acrylic, soil, and sediment balance materiality and feeling, Gillet's particular blend of abstraction and figuration appeared primordial, metaphysical, and ahead of its time.

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