



43 Lawrence (Larry) Poons

1937 – American

Untitled #6

acrylic on canvas, on verso signed, titled, dated 1975 and inscribed *Club House*
94 × 63 in, 238.8 × 160 cm

PROVENANCE

Ace Gallery, Los Angeles
Private Collection, Toronto

BETWEEN 1971 AND the mid-1980s, Larry Poons made the “Throw” paintings—mysterious cascades of unnamable hues and richly inflected texture, such as *Untitled #6*, from 1975. They celebrate the fluidity of paint itself, yet colour, in all its permutations and tonalities, intensities and modulations, remains paramount. “Painting is colour,” Poons often says. “There’s nothing else—that’s all there is in painting.”¹ Works such as *Untitled #6* are expanses of self-sufficient streams of varied hues that refer only to themselves, individually and in relation to each other, completely detached from allusion.

Poons’s throw paintings are also about the history of their own making and the challenges posed by the recent history of modernism. Their unstable colour relationships trigger thoughts about Pierre Bonnard’s flickering hues and the gorgeous chroma of Claude Monet’s late paintings, while their expansive all-overness suggests Jackson Pollock’s all-over webs and Jules Olitski’s sprayed sheets of colour. Poons says, “I feel closest to artists whose work embodies a no-compromise visual statement towards maximizing its art potential as art. Not its potential as anything else.”² His relationship to the artists that he admires is motivated by a wish to equal their achievement. “You’re in competition with every great painting that’s ever existed,” he says.³

Poons began the throw paintings in 1971, after abandoning the crisp, pulsating “dot” works that first established his reputation and when he was beginning to experiment with thick paint, poured onto canvas laid on the floor. His retreat from the meticulous “dot” paintings may have been a manifestation of the widespread desire among his aesthetic peers to subvert the dramatic gestures of Abstract Expressionism. Many of Poons’s older colleagues—Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, Kenneth Noland and Helen Frankenthaler, for example—were applying colour by pouring, spraying, using rollers and squeegees, or staining.

The throw paintings owe their genesis to Clement Greenberg noticing the vibrant drips of colour on the plastic sheets protecting a stack of rolled up paintings when he visited Poons’s studio. “Clem said ‘Look at that,’” Poons recalls, “and I thought ‘I could throw it and I could get all this drawing. All this complication.’ That’s honey for any painter who’s a real painter.”⁴ Following the implications of the drips and splatters, Poons invented an unprecedented way of working, fastening an entire roll of canvas around the walls of the studio and, as he describes it, he “threw the paint from buckets.”⁵ He co-opted gravity to do his drawing, freeing himself from reliance on conventional skills and liberating his formidable talent and finely honed instincts.

Whether this was an attempt to recreate, with more aesthetic ambition, the accidental spatters, or an irrepressible response to an internal imperative, the results were spectacular. Poons’s improbable method produced superbly orchestrated, expressive

works, such as *Untitled #6*, generated by techniques developed over countless hours of throwing different densities of different colours, at different angles, at different surfaces. The throw itself was a virtuoso manipulation of the contents of a five-gallon can of paint hoisted shoulder height and launched with great force, but he constantly changed the speed, explosiveness and direction of the paint flow to create different orchestrations of colour and texture, always remaining critical of what evolved. The limits and orientation of individual paintings were determined last. The entire series records Poons’s inventing and mastering of a difficult, complex way of working, one as exacting as any traditional depiction with a brush.

Poons likens his painting the entire roll of canvas to the filmmaker’s accumulation of multiple scenes; cropping is like deciding which are essential and which expendable. Only what he finds most compelling is kept, a choice that usually depends on colour. “Colour is light,” Poons has said repeatedly. “It’s all light—if we’re talking painting... It isn’t anything but a controlled moment of light.”⁶

We thank Karen Wilkin, curator, critic and teacher of New York Studio School’s MFA art history seminars, who has written extensively on Larry Poons, for contributing the above essay.

This work will be included in the forthcoming *Catalogue Raisonné of Paintings* currently being prepared by the Larry Poons Studio.

1. Larry Poons, conversations with the author, various dates, 1982–2019.
2. Poons, interview by John Zinsser, *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Fall/Winter 1989, 34.
3. Ibid.
4. Poons, interview by Karen Wilkin, *American Federation of Arts* [Larry Poons podcasts], “3. On Greenberg,” July 13, 2010, <http://www.afaweb.org>.
5. Poons, interview by David Rhodes, *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2017, <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/10/art/Larry-Poons-with-David-Rhodes>.
6. Poons, interview by Wilkin, “8. A Controlled Moment of Light.”

ESTIMATE: \$100,000 – 150,000