

Ce catalogue accompagne l'exposition  
« Roger Edgar Gillet. La grande dérision »  
qui se tient au musée Estrine,  
à Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, du 14 février  
au 7 juin 2026 et au musée des Beaux-Arts  
de Rennes du 27 juin au 20 septembre 2026.

# ROGER EDGAR GILLET

## La grande dérision

Couverture : *Le Harem (Signal)*, 1969, voir p. 92  
© Adapp, Paris, 2026, pour les œuvres  
de Francis Bacon (p. 30 et 31), Jean Fautrier  
(p. 23) et Roger Edgar Gillet  
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Portrait de Gillet devant la toile *Lambaréné Beach* en 1976.

MARA HOBERMAN

# ABSTRACTION ↔ FIGURATION

L'IMPORTANT,  
C'EST LE VOYAGE,  
PAS LA DESTINATION

ROGER EDGAR GILLET : 1952-1962

Dans les années 1950 et 1960, alors que la peinture gestuelle domine la scène artistique des deux côtés de l'Atlantique, Roger Edgar Gillet se détourne de l'abstraction pure pour expérimenter divers degrés de figuration. Cette évolution stylistique, inhabituelle pour l'époque, est le fruit d'un long processus de réflexion et d'efforts acharnés. Si de nombreux récits de la carrière de Gillet situent un tournant unique au début des années 1960, une analyse plus large révèle que l'artiste a exploré les frontières entre abstraction et figuration à plusieurs reprises dès la fin des années 1940 et jusqu'aux années 1990, lorsque ses marines ont commencé à reprendre l'aspect de compositions abstraites. Bien que ses premières tentatives de fusionner les champs de l'abstraction et de la figuration, à cette époque, n'aient pas été au goût du jour – et pas encore assez politiques pour être considérées comme avant-gardistes –, rétrospectivement, ces tableaux-là paraissent précurseurs voire pionniers.

Pour mieux comprendre la motivation ainsi que les implications du passage de Gillet de l'abstraction à la figuration, cet essai se concentrera essentiellement sur la décennie formatrice de 1952 à 1962. C'est au cours de cette période que l'artiste s'établit à Paris et effectua plusieurs voyages marquants, dont deux aux États-Unis et un à Londres. En France comme à l'étranger, Gillet faisait en effet partie d'un riche dialogue transatlantique sur le modernisme, l'abstraction, l'histoire de l'art et le nationalisme. Le fait qu'il ait finalement suivi ses propres impulsions artistiques plutôt que de se plier aux préférences des arbitres du goût dominant le distingua de bon nombre de ses pairs, en France comme aux États-Unis. Réexaminer son œuvre en 2026, à présent que les barrières entre abstraction et figuration se sont largement effacées, apporte un nouvel éclairage sur son travail transitionnel.

Certains tableaux des années 1940 et 1950 attestent que Gillet jouait déjà à associer des éléments figuratifs et abstraits dans les compositions de ses débuts. *Abstrait gris* (1949, cat. 6), une œuvre émergente dont le titre oriente clairement



Fig. 1. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement en gris et noir n° 1*, 1871, huile sur toile, 144,3 x 163 cm, Paris, musée d'Orsay, inv. RF 699

l'observateur vers une interprétation non représentationnelle, comprend des formes noires, blanches et grises. Mais malgré ce que suggère le titre, la peinture présente un aspect indéniablement figuratif, qui semble loin d'être fortuit. Dans le coin inférieur droit du tableau, un ovale blanc évoque la tête d'un corps allongé, dont les bras et les jambes semblent dressés vers le ciel, comme dans une posture de yoga.

Avant la guerre, les premières inspirations artistiques de Gillet comprenaient les peintres nabis Pierre Bonnard et Édouard Vuillard, qui brouillaient les représentations picturales traditionnelles du corps et de son environnement reliant visuellement – parfois même en incrustant – des sujets humains dans leur cadre. Très tôt, Gillet rechercha la même ambiguïté en jouant avec des formes qui pouvaient être interprétées différemment. *Abstrait gris* est une abstraction qui peut aussi être vue comme un nu, rappelant la composition en gris, blanc et noir de Bonnard, *Femme assoupie sur un lit* (1899, musée d'Orsay, RF 1977 75). Le titre de Gillet incite également à une comparaison avec *Arrangement*

# ABSTRACTION ↔ FIGURATION

## IT'S NOT THE DESTINATION, IT'S THE JOURNEY

### ROGER EDGAR GILLET: 1952–1962

MARA HOBERMAN

In the 1950s and 60s, when gestural painting dominated the art scenes on both sides of the Atlantic, Roger Edgar Gillet was pivoting away from pure abstraction and experimenting with varying degrees of figuration in his work. This stylistic shift was unusual for its time; hard-fought and the result of a long process of reflection. While many accounts of Gillet's career locate a single turning point in the early 1960s, casting a wider net reveals that Gillet tested the limits between abstraction and figuration at many points throughout his career—as early as the late 1940s and well into the 1990s (when his seascapes began to melt back into abstract compositions.) Although his earliest attempts at blending the realms of abstraction and figuration were largely seen as unfashionable in their own time (and yet not political enough to be considered *avant-garde*), in hindsight, these particular paintings appear prescient. One might even say, pioneering. To better understand the impetus for, as well as the implications of, Gillet's journey from abstraction to figuration, this

essay will focus primarily on the formative decade between 1952–1962. During this period, the artist established himself in Paris and made several impactful overseas trips, two to the United States and one to London. At home, as well as abroad, Gillet was part of an important transatlantic discourse about modernism, abstraction, art history and nationalism. That he ultimately followed his own artistic impulses, rather than catering to the preferences of dominant tastemakers, set Gillet apart from many of his peers in France and in the US. Reexamining the artist, in 2025, now that the barriers between abstraction and figuration have mostly crumbled, makes Gillet's transitional work appear newly relevant.

Certain examples of paintings from the 1940s and 1950s establish that Gillet was already playing with combining figurative and abstract elements within his compositions very early on in his career. *Abstrait gris*, 1949 (cat. 6) a nascent work whose title clearly guides the viewer away from a representational interpretation, comprises black, white and

gray abstract forms. Despite the title's instance otherwise, the painting has an undeniably figurative aspect, which feels far from accidental. In the painting's lower right corner, a white oval suggests the head of a supine body with arms and legs reaching up towards the sky in a yoga-like position. Before the war, Gillet's earliest artistic inspirations included Nabi painters Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard, who confused traditional painterly representations of figure and ground by visually linking—sometimes embedding—human subjects to their surroundings. Early on, Gillet courted a similar ambiguity by playing with forms that could be interpreted on multiple levels. *Abstrait gris*, is an abstraction that can also be seen as a nude, recalling the gray, white and black composition of Bonnard's *Woman Reclining on a Bed*, 1899 (Musée d'Orsay, RF 1977 75). Gillet's title also begs comparison to James Abbott McNeill Whistler's *Arrangement in Gray and Black n°1*, 1871 (fig. 1), a figurative work that became the first American painting to be bought by the French state, in 1891. In this painting, which was shown at the Louvre in 1945 (where Gillet could have seen it), Whistler depicts his mother in what the artist insisted was not a portrait, but an arrangement of forms and shades. Notions of stylistic fluidity, as expressed by earlier generation painters, laid groundwork for Gillet.

The 1950s saw Gillet confirmed as a member of the new School of Paris. Early in the decade he began showing at the same galleries as abstract painters like Hans Hartung, Marcelle Loubchansky, Georges Mathieu and Pierre Soulages. Gillet's arrival on the scene also coincided with the first gallery shows in Paris of certain American painters—buzzy events that fueled international conversations about the origins, possibilities and preeminence of abstraction. In 1952 Jackson Pollock made his solo debut in Paris at Galerie Paul Facchetti. According to the gallery's guestbook, Gillet visited the exhibition on opening day, signing his name on the first page, next to Sam Francis and Jean Dubuffet.<sup>1</sup>

Later that same year, Gillet would show alongside Pollock as well as other New York School painters including Willem De Kooning, Hans Hofmann and Franz Kline, in Michel Tapié's seminal exhibition "Un Art Autre" ("Art of Another Kind"), also at Galerie Facchetti. Tapié, an ambitious critic, art advisor, and curator, who forged strong ties in the US and Japan as well as in his native France, promoted an international group of painters whose aesthetically diverse work, he believed, conveyed a vision of reality that had nothing to do with realism. Among the three paintings that Gillet presented in "Un Art Autre," *La Grande Chouette officiante*, 1952 (fig. 2), stands out as semi-figurative. In contrast to *Abstrait gris*, the title of this work encourages viewers to find a figure—in this case that of an animal—amidst a thicket of gestural swirls of white, yellow and taupe paint. Guided by this clue, the viewer finds himself confronted with the bright eyes of an owl starting out from darkness. Within Tapié's curatorial selection of *informel* artists, Gillet's painting was shown in the

company of figurative works by Karel Appel, Victor Brauner and Jean Dubuffet and abstractions by Hartung, Mathieu, Henri Michaux, Alfonso Osorio, Pollock, Mark Tobey and Wols. In "Un Art Autre," Gillet and Jean Fautrier, stood apart for working somewhere between these two camps.

"Un Art Autre" included at least one painting from Fautrier's haunting series "Les Otages," (1942–1944), which depicts Nazi prisoners as barely recognizable human forms with featureless heads and floating bodies (fig. 3). Like Gillet's owl, *Corps d'otage*, 1944, is subtly (and, in Fautrier's case, agonizingly) figurative. The two paintings share in common a thick impasto that lends a simultaneous sense of corpulence and fragility to the subject matter. This shared link to physical reality through the materiality of paint is part of what drew Tapié to both artists' work. Years before Tapié made the connection, however, "Les Otages" had already made a lasting impression on Gillet, who saw the series when it was first exhibited at Galerie Drouin, in 1945. By the early 50s Gillet himself was also using thick encrusted paint to evoke a real subjects and, at the same time, insisting on another, equally important reality: the physical presence and properties of paint itself.

Fautrier would continue to be a source of inspiration for Gillet in the years to come, most directly when he penned a text for the winners of the *Prix Fénéon*, an honor that Gillet shared with René Laubiès, in 1954. Established in 1949 to support young artists, the Fénéon prize offered a modest cash sum of 100,000 French Francs. In the long term, Fautrier's text would prove to be much more valuable. His short essay begins by describing the evolution of painterly styles and concerns, evoking Uccello as the starting point for illusionistic painting and naming Delacroix and Ingres as heirs to this tradition. In conclusion, Fautrier credits Manet and photography with saving painting by paving the way for *art informel*. Implying Gillet to keep painting moving on a forward trajectory, Fautrier writes that he hopes the young artist will "rather go in search of a tiny new vision than wade through a diatribe on what's already been said a hundred times."<sup>3</sup> Challenging the young artist not to rest on his laurels, but stay fresh through reinvention, Fautrier's words prophesize Gillet's risk-taking later on in his career.

In the mid-1950s, France and the United States went to great lengths to promote homegrown artistic styles—mostly abstract painting (with some notable exceptions)—and to export representative artists to the other side of the Atlantic. Important gallerists like Sidney Janis and Leo Castelli introduced New York School artists to Paris with exhibitions like "American Vanguard Art for Paris Exhibition," which was first presented at Janis's gallery in New York, in 1951, before traveling into Paris, in 1952, where it was hosted by the Galerie de France. There were also institutional exhibitions like "Twelve Modern American Painters and Sculptors" (1953) and "Modern Art in the U.S.A." (1955). Both of these "soft power"