## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

ROY LICHTENSTEIN
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Roy Lichtenstein was a bit inconsistent when he moved beyond the obvious quotation strategy that inspired him during the '60s. Some of the artist's attempts to overlay his dots, stripes, flat colors, and hard outlines onto other subjects gained real punch from the stylistic grafting, as in his brushstroke and mirror paintings and a number of his interior scenes. Other bids were less successful, such as his efforts with slews of textbook pieces and references to modernist painting from Cézanne to Dalí. The better of his late works came when the artist seemed less concerned with using his style as a kind of roving signature and instead looked to see how he could use his motifs as the foundation for smart paintings built from scratch. Excellent examples appear in Lichtenstein's mostly late-'80s series of "Perfect" and "Imperfect" paintings and related studies, which received their first comprehensive treatment in this exhibition.

The "Perfect" paintings are compositions generated by multiple straight lines meeting at angles to suggest a single continuous path, as when one joins five lines with five angles to form a pentagram. Lichtenstein's works, however, are highly asymmetrical, using lines that cross to create many triangles and other shapes. As the lines usually meet in angles at the edge of the canvas, they generate a tension between the sides of the rectilinear format, as if literally pulling or lacing the composition together while simultaneously signaling an outward thrust. The lines maintain their hard edge and boldness throughout, but occasionally shift in color and thickness, while the shapes they define are filled with solid flat and metallic color or swatches of stripes and dot patterns. Recognizing that stretching or bowing any line or adjusting any one angle altered the entire composition, because all the lines were connected, Lichtenstein later began making the "Imperfect" paintings. The artist took compositions that could have been contained within a rectangular format and, skewing them so that points would stick out here and there beyond the boundaries of the frame, allowed for actual physical deviations, the canvases customized with outcroppings to fit the tweaked compositions. In some instances, this exhibition presented "Perfect" and "Imperfect" versions of the same root composition, and the whole dual project was fleshed out astutely by the inclusion of elegant drawn and collaged studies.

Lichtenstein here was not relying on elements of his style to provide a signature, crutch, or shtick, but instead daftly and sensibly employing them as tools in elegant, playful abstractions. Whether you prefer the "Perfect," with their tense respect for boundaries, or the "Imperfect," with their flagrant disregard, both bodies of work stick in the mind with their punchy color, Op-Pop vibrating patterns, and awesome, burst-out dynamism where densely woven lines in one part of a composition generate small shapes fanning and darting out into broader areas elsewhere. There's a strange double edge in picking out and focusing on this one body of late-career, '80s work by the painter—especially in Los Angeles, which has been an epicenter of Pop-infused abstraction of late. In these series, Lichtenstein outpaced not only much of his own work, but also much work by other painters who could only hope to hit stride like this once in their career. Lichtenstein may well have been at his best and among the best as an abstract painter, and there may be no better time to reconsider him in this regard.

—CM
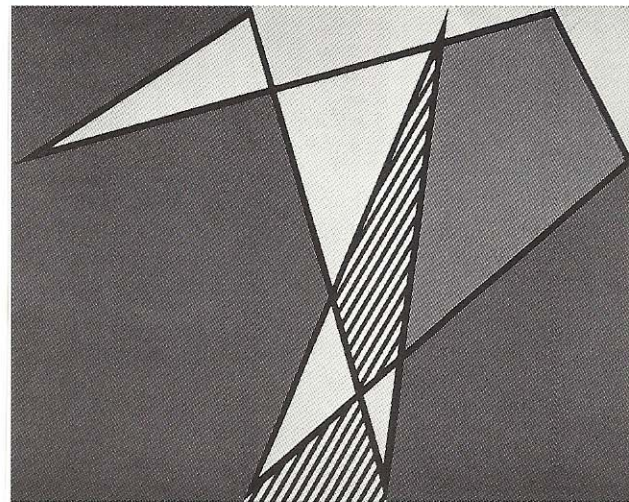
Roy Lichtenstein, *Perfect Painting*, 1978,
oil and magna on canvas, 40 x 50".