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ART IN REVIEW: MILTON AVERY

by Roberta Smith

MILTON AVERY
'Industrial Revelations'
Knoedler & Company
19 East 70th Street
Manhattan
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The great American modernist Milton Avery always looks a bit dour in photographs. He seems to lack the bright disposition that might logically be expected from the jaunty topographical abbreviations, effulgent colors and lively textures of his best-known landscape paintings. These works expand on the grandeur of nature with sly jokes, and they redesign its vistas into flattened shapes that keep elegance and bluntness in even balance.

Avery's little-known depictions of New York City's waterways, bridges and railroad yards from the late 1920s and early '30s appear to be more in character. As seen in this knockout exhibition, they are consistently overcast, bordering on gloomy. Dominated by grayish shades of reds and blues, the images date from the Depression and seem to catch their subjects in the fading light of a long, hard workday.

With 13 oils and nearly two dozen watercolors, gouaches and pencil drawings, the show excitingly broadens the understanding of Avery's development. The most familiar works from these years tend to be portraits, but here he is out in the open, already dealing with the forms, spaces and luminosities of the landscape, albeit the urban one.

Avery the suave pictorial trickster, whose faith in paint and the plasticity of shape knows no limits, is very much in the offing. "Harbor," from 1928, gives you buildings, water, sheds and a passing tug: Precisionist subject matter by someone who has no patience with precision, as attested by the rough scumblings of the white-gray sky. Shorthand and short cuts are increasingly the order of the day. Buildings are stacked together like rubber blocks.

In "Barge" the windows of a reddish factory with immense charcoal-colored smokestacks are dashed-off rectangles with curved tops, while those of a boxy blue building near what appears to be the Manhattan Bridge are line upon line of staccato dabs. They break ground for the cursory architecture of Philip Guston's late work.

"The Blue Bridge" has a similar building deep in shadow on the right, partly blocking light that has the mysteriousness of de Chirico. It illuminates the water and the hulking, almost reptilian bridge on the left, rendered as a series of repeating marks and patterns: contrasting dots, loops and grids.

Avery has long been admired and beloved as an American original; heir to the Impressionists, Fauves and Matisse; friend and mentor to Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. It is amazing to realize that, after all these years, his many-splendored achievement is still not fully visible.