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Art in Review

Harry Callahan and Jackson Pollock

'Early Photographs
and Drawings'

*Pace/MacGill Gallery
32 East 57th Street
Manhattan
Through April 16*

This exemplary show of 10 mostly small ink drawings by Jackson Pollock and 22 small black-and-white photographs by Harry Callahan is a race with two winners. But Callahan benefits more, simply because his early experimental efforts are less firmly planted in the New York art mythos than Pollock's. The majority of the works date from the 1940s, when the two artists, both born in 1912, were maturing rapidly.

During this decade they were exploring their chosen mediums' potentials for abstraction, all-over composition and randomness. In drawing, which admittedly was not his main mode of expression, Pollock pursued these elements in small notational images. Those here alternate between impatient riffs on Picasso and schematic renderings of natural forms, including grass, all the while flirting with Surrealist automatism.

Callahan, living in Detroit and then Chicago during this time, began by finding these elements in the natural world (including dried grass and brushes silhouetted against snow) and sometimes pushed them further by using his camera idiosyncratically.

His 1943 photographs of light rippling across dark water — in circling lines that resulted from extended exposures — are as classically "all-over" as the drip paintings that Pollock began making several years later. Callahan went on to produce strikingly calligraphic white-on-black works by photographing the beam of a flashlight in the dark while moving his camera, as well as delicate linear tangles

achieved by taking multiple exposures of bare tree branches overhead.

The tree branch photographs were made in 1956, the year Pollock died. (He lived only about half as long as Callahan, who died in 1999.) It is possible to wonder if Callahan, who met Pollock in the early '50s at a party in Chicago, might have made the photographs as a homage to the painter. More concretely, this insightful exhibition, organized with the Washburn Gallery, counters the New York-centric, painting-first view that postwar American abstract photography was indebted to Abstract Expressionist painting, by proposing that, at least with Callahan, it was an independent, parallel development.

ROBERTA SMITH



PACE/MACGILL GALLERY

"Multiple Exposure Tree," by Harry Callahan, is part of a survey that puts his works alongside drawings by Jackson Pollock.