

Shelter

Ralph Middleton
(American, 1950 - c.2005)

[In the gallery] Ralph Middleton: Paper Houses
November 4 – December 5, 2020

[Online] Ralph Middleton: The California Years
October 30 – December 5, 2020

Shelter is thrilled to announce an exhibition of paintings by the late self-taught artist Ralph Middleton. Offering a focused presentation of a series of paintings created in September 1988 in the Bay Area, a complementary online exhibition will dive deeper into Middleton the artist, with a look at and comparison of paintings from Los Angeles created in the mid- to late-90s.

Little is known about Ralph Middleton's early life other than the fact he was born in, and started to paint in, Harlem, New York. Middleton's work began to gain recognition amongst folk and outsider collectors in the 1960s and 70s and at some point during those years, he moved to the west coast, making homes out of abandoned rail stations and underneath bridges.

The consistency of color palette and materials in the series on display in the gallery suggests that someone, possibly a patron, arts program, or supporter, gifted Middleton some paints and board, which he fervently used to create wildly energetic paintings of everything from people he knew, to seemingly abstract scenes of color and line that, we may assume, reflected some of the energy within and surrounding the artist. Middleton deftly keeps each painting from feeling weighty with a subtle and effective use of white, both as negative space and peeking through brushstrokes, the latter of which show an artist confident in his hand. Painted on illustration board, the artist signed each piece and often provided an exact date and location, perhaps in a way providing a record – tangible and visible – of this particular moment in his transient life.

Middleton resided in Los Angeles in the 1990s, where he attracted attention from musicians, artists, and collectors seeking out exciting creations by unknown and under-known artists. At the time he was living under a bridge, and these predominantly young and creative collectors would visit him, delivering materials or acquiring work. Despite his precarious living situation, Middleton was known as being self-educated, with a particular interest in philosophy, film, and the arts.

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