

ARTFORUM

Paul Thek

ALEXANDER AND BONIN
132 Tenth Avenue
January 10–February 21

Paul Thek first visited the Italian isle Ponza in 1968 and later sojourned there, on and off, for a decade. It is said that he spent these salad days boating, swimming, reading, and, as his works from the time avow, painting—namely, the sea, over and over. When in Rome, he deftly transcribed passages from St. Augustine's *Confessions* in three of his profuse notebooks ("Do the heaven and the earth then contain Thee, since Thou fillest them?") alongside some of his own contemplations: black-and-white Polaroids of clouds. Is this how myth builds?

A quick Ponza image search is jaw dropping for its array of acrid, unreal blues, but Thek's cerulean hues are softer—though not without bite. Dedicated to his work in Italy in the 1970s, this show makes a strong case for a rigor under the waves, against interpretation. While the gouache seascapes on newspaper are by now perhaps familiar emblems after his 2010–11 retrospective, the few small oil-on-canvas works that zoom out to broader scenes, astonish. There is *Untitled (figures by rocks, water)*, ca. 1975, which gives us a diver, a sunbather, a rocky grotto, and water for days. The scene nearly seems fixed, like a postcard—the opposite of the once-decaying newspapers. On the heels of Robert Gober's recent retrospective, which had two humble figurative canvases from 1975 opening and closing the show, Thek's impact on a younger New York generation feels specific and local despite his wanderlust. The city was lucky he came back.



Paul Thek, *Untitled (figures by rocks, water)*, ca. 1975,
oil on canvas, 19 1/2 x 19 1/2".

— Lauren O'Neill-Butler