



Thoughts on Painting

I was listening to Charlie Rose interviewing the jazz musician Wynton Marsalis last night. Wynton was speaking about Louis Armstrong and how he had reinvented jazz with his original sound and sense of timing; he had given new colour to jazz and had created a whole new depth of feeling. This is the same way I relate to the originality of Juan Miro, Jackson Pollock, Morris Louis or Hans Hofmann, painters from whom I have derived inspiration for colour and new ways of drawing. I also derive the same sort of inspiration from artists of my own generation now known as the New New Painting group since the late 1980s. The NNP's innovations brought forward fresh experiences that expand our vision, renewing our awareness of life itself. This spirit of renewal is at the heart of my need to paint. I aim to empower and uplift the human spirit, and to express a sense of creative resistance against the complacency of the human spirit itself. I search for this renewal of experiences through the process of the painting medium.

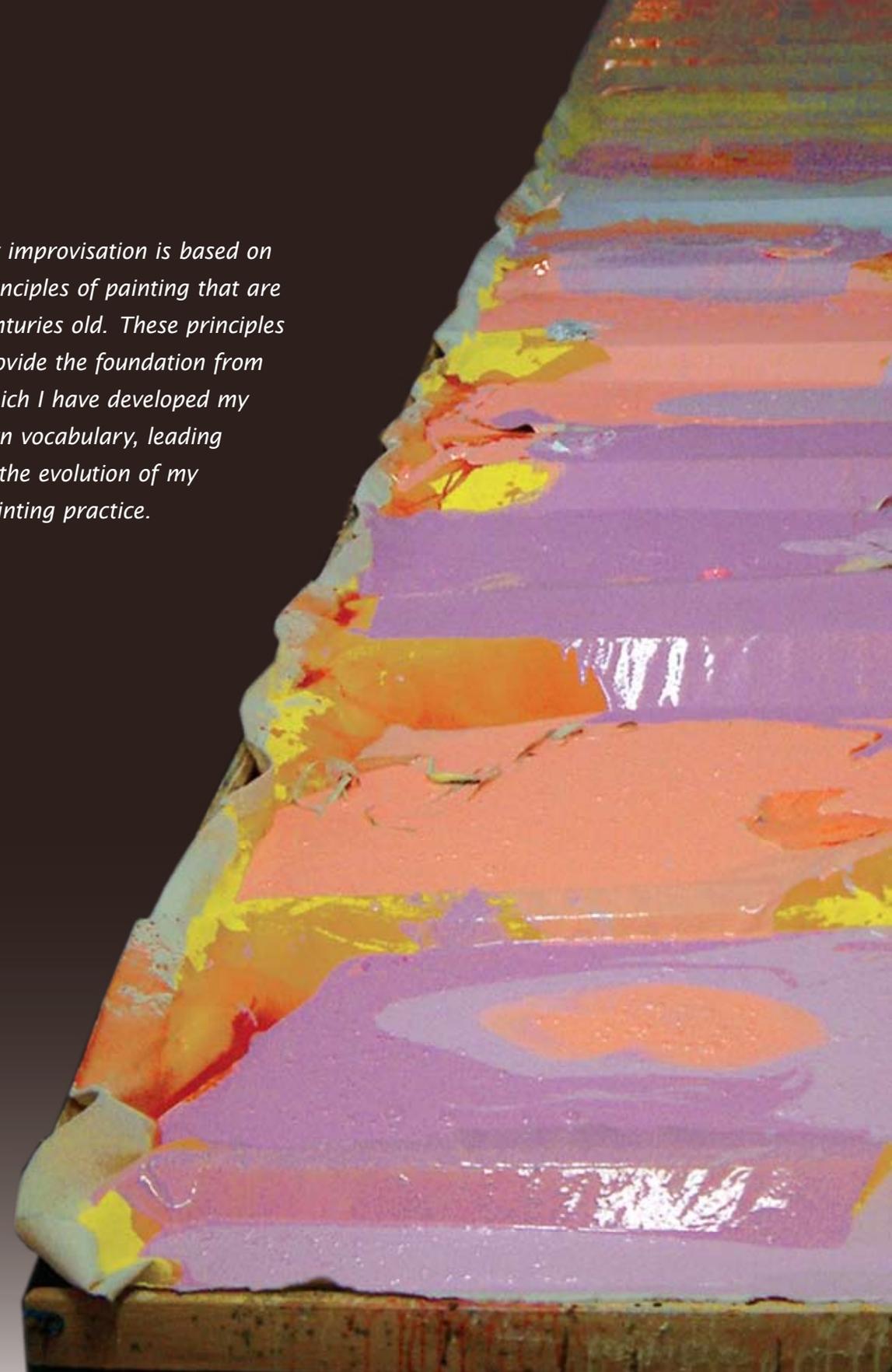
Art for me, like jazz, is primarily about creating and empowering lasting feelings through invention. My improvisation is based on principles of painting that are centuries old. These principles provide the foundation from which I have developed my own vocabulary, leading to the evolution of my painting practice. I rely on my aesthetic experience to guide me in my judgment of goodness, and my experience of other art and the quality of those experiences to guide me in assessing the comparative quality of my work and that of others.

The following are my thoughts on some of the contributing factors in making my work, followed by an addendum, which discusses the rudimentary principles and artistic environment. For those less experienced art readers, it may in fact be more helpful if read first.

Modes of Drawing

Drawing is the foundation of how any work of art is organized or composed. A work starts with the idea, the act of conception and imaginative visualization, which is the fundamental organizing principle. The basic elements of mark, line, area, shape, and tonality are starting points for drawing, and may encompass any media or organizational approach. Whatever the medium, the use of verticals, horizontals, diagonals and circular movements are basic dynamic compositional possibilities of visual layout. Cézanne referred to these in his observation of nature in terms of the cube, the sphere and the cone.

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Lucy Baker, Ken Moffett, Graham Peacock and Bruce Piermarini at Lucy's Connecticut, N.Y. studio in the late 1990s.



Graham Peacock in John Gittins North Brookfield, Massachusetts studio with Bruce Piermarini in the late 1990s.

I prefer to reduce these three-dimensional solids to a purely two-dimensional set of movements concurrent with the two-dimensionality of the picture plane (flat surface). The tools, instruments and media used in drawing will have inherent characteristics revealed by the choice of surface support, such as paper, canvas or wood panels. These surfaces, together with the media and the choice of tool, also reveal their characteristics by the action and hand, arm or body of the artist. The choice, selection and experimentation with these differing modes of the drawing, media, surfaces and apparatus are fundamental to conveying the expression of the artist's concept and feeling. These, and the imaginative decisions that the artist brings forth, will attest to the originality, or not, of the drawing. The ability for an artist's vision to potentially arouse, and perhaps even disturb, the taste and conventions of the day may be likely indicators of the depth of the artist's invention. This manipulation of the medium through the act of mark-making or drawing is therefore inherent with original art and particular to each artist's search for originality.

Artists who may have original colour but not original drawing will inevitably be seen as mannerist, as their mark and organization of the work will be stylistically similar to that of another artist. I see this as being the case with the work of Pierre Bonnard and André Derain, who have strength in their colour but in their drawing are working in the manner of Claude Monet and Henri Matisse, artists who evolved a more powerful statement at a similar time. Limited colour range does not however produce the same limitations or inhibit originality. If the drawing is truly original, as in the case of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, the limitation of colour (they all worked fairly tonally) does not pose a problem if the drawing is new. New drawing is the fundamental underpinning to the evolution of all art.

Historically, shifts in drawn pictorial organization mark radical changes in style. The brush drawing and paint surfaces of van Gogh are in sharp contrast to the refined shading and paint surfaces of the 19th century portrait school. Manet and the Impressionists turned the illusionistic space of the 19th century inside out through flattening the space with bold design influenced by Japanese prints, and by making their surfaces thicker, more painterly and spatially flatter.

Monet's last painting in 1926, housed at the Musée Marmaton in Paris, is a radical and insightful linear, colourful work that seems to anticipate the late all-over linear abstraction of Jackson Pollock. Monet scrawled dry, raw, linear strokes of colour, weaving them together on a flat white surface. This painting, created at the end of Monet's life, is forward reaching in vision and radical in its conception, just like Matisse's *The Snail*, a 10' x 10' large scale collage in the Tate Modern, London executed in 1956, Matisse's last year. This work anticipates the scale and colour of the abstraction that was to follow in the United States in the 1960s with the Colour Field School and the fine-stained geometrically based compositions of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski.

The New New Evolution

In the 1970s, the style of drawing saw surface and colour transformed radically into all-over monotone shades with the thicker surfaces of Larry Poons and the spray gun pictures of Jules Olitski. Olitski continued to make many drawing moves with sprays, rakes, rollers, spatulas, and globs throughout the 1970s and into the '80s.

By the early 1980s, a new group of artists emerged, returning to colour while maintaining an interest in the surface changes of the 1970s, some with added shaping and dimensionality. The main exponents of this direction were the New New Painting group of roughly ten artists located in the Eastern United States and Canada, all with distinctive ways of drawing. They were championed through the insightful writings of Kenworth Moffett, who after leaving his position as Curator of 20th Century Painting at the Boston Museum of Arts published a newsletter, *Moffett's ArtLetter*, in which he wrote two special supplements: "Abstract Art — The Present Situation", Special Supplement #1 March 1986, and "Post-Color Field Painting", Special Supplement #2 March 1986. These articles were insightful, focusing on the inception of a new wave of painting that was emerging at that time. These painters gave rise to my breakthroughs, and continue to provide inspiration for my work today.

Moffett's views from that time remain equally controversial today, and many critics and artists wish to discredit him just as they did Clement Greenberg. Moffett's writings were, and continue to be, a fresh take on the time and do not coincide necessarily with the late tonal reductivism of Greenberg that was a spin-off from his love of Olitski's work. Moffett was the first to embrace this return to full palette colour and the boldness of materiality that began to push beyond the refinement of Olitski. For many years Moffett was one of Greenberg's closest associates but his discovery in the early 1980s that there was a new wave of artists emerging was unfortunately not wholeheartedly supported by Greenberg. Though Greenberg challenged Moffett to go it alone if he thought there was art worth supporting, the independence demonstrated by Moffett was unfortunately taken as a challenge and their relationship deteriorated. (Moffett



National Gallery in Prague, at the opening of the *New New Painting* exhibition in 2002. L-R: Joseph Drappell, Toronto, Canada; Bruce Piermarini, West Brookfield, Massachusetts; Lucy Baker, Connecticut, N.Y.; Steven Brent, North Carolina; Irene Neal, Connecticut; Thomas Vicek, Curator, Prague; Graham Peacock Edmonton, Canada; Ken Carpenter, Art Critic, Toronto, Canada; Marjorie Minkin, Boston, Massachusetts; Kenworth Moffett, Art Critic, Stamford, Connecticut, N.Y.; and Jerald Webster, Albany, New York, USA.

had for many years accompanied Greenberg to studios and exhibitions and was his younger colleague)

I knew Clement Greenberg, having been introduced to him in Edmonton in 1973. Throughout the years he made visits to my studio in Edmonton and at the Triangle Workshop in New York, and I in turn visited with him at his Central Park West apartment in New York. I found our conversations stimulating and useful in developing my eye as to the quality of my work and our taste. We differed to some degree in our taste and that is what made the visits more interesting. When it came to colour and the palette that worked best in my works, we ended up differing. I recall an illuminating discussion regarding the palette of van Gogh; Greenberg thought it had too much "bunt", the German word for colour.

Despite what people say, Greenberg preferred individuals who had something to say, and disliked sycophants. On my last visit with him, following his release from a New York hospital in the fall of 1995, I asked how his hospital stay had been. He replied that he had fallen by putting

both legs in the same trouser leg thus breaking his hip. This had prolonged his stay and really set him back but the most difficult part of his stay was the visitors who would come but have nothing to say, leaving him to make all the conversation. I joked that they were all afraid of him, to which he laughed and replied, "What a legacy." Greenberg could be harsh and sometimes impossible but he admired those who thought about what he had to say and responded intelligently. He was always up for a good debate and liked to be centre stage, and naturally missed the influence he once had. When I asked him why he didn't publish anymore, Greenberg's reply was, "I've done my bit, now it's up to Ken (Moffett) - if he has something to say, let him say it" (Greenberg ceased writing professionally in 1969).

It was my need to turn away from close value painting in 1982 that set me on a different course. The fissured surfaces of my early works were more distinctive when colours in each of the layers were contrasted. In fact, the layering of colour in an all-over contrast defined the uniqueness of my work which Moffett



Marjorie Minkin
Rocket 2001
86 x 30 inches*
Acrylic on Lexan

embraced and Greenberg did not. My point with Greenberg was that what he admired about my work was when it looked more like Olitski, whereas when the contrast of the colour layers was more pronounced the work took on a new character — one that Moffett, the artist Lucy Baker (Moffett's wife at the time) and I thought offered new potential. This direction was ultimately the one I have followed.

There is a distinguished group of art professionals who presently agree that the New New is a distinct and exciting new movement. The dealer André Emmerich, the collector Lewis Cabot, and the art historian William Agee, are three examples. Others include the American critics Donald Kuspit, David Carrier and Arelene Raven, the Canadian critics Ken Carpenter, Belgian philosopher Marcel Paquet, as well as museum directors and curators in the USA and abroad who have selected the New New group for exhibitions. Three collectors have built large collections of their work and many writers have published pieces on their work, some of which are reprinted in this book and others may be viewed at www.grahampeacock.com.

I can hardly be seen as objective here as Ken Moffett has written extensive praise of my work plus I consider him my closest advisor when it comes to looking at art. It is important for me to say here that Moffett has remained true to his eye in all the years I have known him, never wavering in support and critique, when necessary, of the art he admires. It was through my visits with him and Lucy that I met and began to know some of the artists Ken was beginning to pay attention to. These artists were all trying to find their way out from under the dominant influence of the work of Jules Olitski, whom Greenberg, and many of us, hold as a great artist of his time.

Gradually in the early 1980s a number of us began to find our way towards new beginnings, which as it turned out would lead some of us back to polychrome colour and eventually for some to shaping and dimensionality. These artists are the core of the New New Painting Group, so named by Gerald Piltzer after seeing an exhibition of Gittins, Piermarini and myself at the Atwood Gallery in Worcester, Massachusetts. We had titled the exhibition '*New New Painting*', in response to all the shows we saw in N.Y.C. entitled *New Painting*, which had essentially no new painting, just recent work.

The New New Painters

Lucy Baker (1955, Connecticut, USA) practices a Pollock/Frankenthaler-like drawing technique, but her colour and propensity for adding plastic beads, glass and glitters to her paint produced an especially original group of plexiglas works. She is a gifted colourist and has made forays into figurative and narrative painting. She has been for many years one of the driving forces behind the NNP and a leader in its artistic development.

Steven Brent (1953, Connecticut, now North Carolina, USA) Brent's drawing is based on a Noland/Poons-like organization with a pronounced banding (cardboard rolls covered with canvas) with paint cascaded over, often with pronounced inclusion of glitter and metallic paint. Recently he has been working with flatter sheet metals and metallic pigment interactions.

Joseph Drapell (1940, Czech Republic; Toronto, Canada) works with vivid under-painting covered by an all-over raised, ridged combing of gel glazes, and more recently with pronounced dimensional edge drawing. Strong narratives derived from land, sea or sky/starscapes often inspire and inform his work.

John Gittins (Brookfield, Massachusetts, USA) squeezes thick impasto pipes of coloured gel in Pollock snake-like linear compositions on poured or spooned grounds. More recently, he has been working with photography.

Roy Lerner (1954, South Salem, New York, USA) draws by chopping a thick layer of coloured gels into fused Olitski/Impressionist-like all-over surfaces. Recently he has been introducing more aggressive linear elements into his compositions.

Anne Low (Connecticut, USA) works with fluid acrylics and pours colours in a Frankenthaler approach with a pronounced imagery which echos Miro. In other works this lyrical approach becomes more painterly and gestural with influences of Olitski.

Marjorie Minkin (1941, Boston, Massachusetts, USA) works with molding plastic sheeting, undulating and introducing colour zones in a translucent all-over plane with shaped, mainly rectangular, compositions.

Irene Neal (1936, Connecticut, USA) pours her colour over irregular shapes, creating swirls and movements, almost like lava flows, with a wide range of rich marbled colour.

Bruce Piermarini (1953, West Brookfield, Massachusetts, USA) has evolved over several motifs with some major dimensional canvases in which he affixes foam and dips and pours paint, producing bold marbled compositions that are some of the most original works I have seen in a long time. Today this marbleization continues on flatter surfaces.

Jerald Webster (1953, Albany, New York, USA) has a Miro compositional approach, pouring on a Louis/Frankenthaler freshness and a remarkable full colour palette with many rotondo and oval canvases. Earlier he worked with a palette knife application.

I have been associated with these artists since the early 1980s, but it was 1989 when Dr. Kenworth Moffett, then Director of the Museum of Art in Fort Lauderdale Florida, curated a year long exhibition of the group's abstraction at the Museum. The Parisian art collector and dealer Gerald Piltzer became interested in some of our work, and so arranged a debut exhibition of 'New New Painting' at Galerie Gerald Piltzer in Paris in December of 1991. Piltzer also produced a book entitled *New New Painting* with Éditions Française and continued to exhibit the group throughout Europe for the following 10 years. I have exhibited with this group in 51 exhibitions throughout Europe and North America.



Anne Low
Boomerang Blue 1998
60 x 48 inches*
Acrylic on canvas



Lucy Baker
60 x 96 inches*
Acrylic on canvas

Abstract Painting

In abstract painting the act of drawing becomes the compositional organizational element. The scale of the drawing elements replaces the subject of representational painting, and becomes the organizing subject itself. As in the big, black, brush paintings of Franz Kline (1910-1962) and in the slab paintings and late wash paintings of Hans Hofmann (1880-1966), the direction and scale of the brush mark makes, draws and becomes the image of the work. Jules Olitski (1922-2007) showed, more than anyone, the inventive and masterful use of brushes, rakes, squeegees, rollers and mops, all of which he used to draw on and in the surface, and how subtle shifts in tone, texture and movement can compose a painting. Through his inventive new drawing, colour and subtle tonalities, Olitski was the force of painting in so many ways for the '60s, '70s, '80s and '90s.

The Grandfather Principle

Change or evolution of art style is a historical continuum. Artists learn from each other, by absorbing or rejecting trends. The tendency is for artists to reject the ways of the present generation and turn to what German art historian Walter Friedlander (1873-1966) referred to as the 'Grandfather principle'; a radical change often precipitated by a returning to, and re-evaluation of, the work of a past generation. This produces a leapfrog effect forward to the present. Essentially, nothing is completely new, nor does it exist without connection to the past, as witnessed by the changing shifts in fashion taste. With a continual quest for the new, the past becomes the source for repackaging the present anew. That renewal can become its own paradigm if it has its own unique characteristics, and if it is of significant innovation and sustains the test of time.

The Brush School—using a signature brush mark

The brush is the most commonly used instrument for painting, with the brushstroke becoming increasingly revealed throughout the centuries as the signature mark of the artist. Rembrandt had his way of using blunt, bold strokes in his self-portraits. Gainsborough loved slippery, elongated strokes and composed his landscapes, portrait scenes with tall trees, Borzoi hunting hounds, and ladies in long elegant gowns. The Impressionists used the brush as a tool to draw and modulate their colour, and had an equally wide range of individuality in their marks. Cézanne adopted a brushing of directional strokes, referencing the, vertical, horizontal, diagonal and circular movement he saw in nature. From the elegance of Renoir to

the softness of Monet and the angularity of Cézanne, each had distinguishing brush marks which encompassed their means of drawing, their mixing of colour and the establishment of the structure and surface of their paintings.

The Western tradition of painting abounds with painterly works in which the act of painting and brush handling is revealed. The Canadian Group of Seven is but one example of how this heritage was assimilated during the 20th century in the Canadian provinces. Emily Carr (1871 - 1945), W.L. Stevenson (1905 - 1966), Stanley Cosgrove (1911 - 2002, Montreal), Rita Cowley (1910 - 2004), Dorothy Knowles (1927 -), Greg Hardy (1950 -), Saskatoon, Sask., Terence Keller (1947 -), Mitchel Smith (1959 -) and Amanda O'Connell (1972 -), Edmonton, are all Canadian artists who show how this heritage of the Brush School can and continues to be uniquely expressed.

The Fluid School - Using the fluidity of the medium to suggest the form

Paint is any liquid composition that, after application to a surface in a thin layer, is converted to a solid film. Paint, by its nature, is a pigment or dye that when added with a binder and diluted with a fluid vehicle can be used to paint and colour. Early man made such concoctions with wild berries and coloured earths, using them as stains and binding them with natural gums. Generations of Chinese calligraphers have explored the fluidity of the medium that becomes so much a part of their expression.

Leonardo da Vinci made drawings starting with free-form candle smoke compositions by holding paper over a flame as a way of introducing random beginnings in his compositions. Velázquez would run washes of oil over his depictions of horses and allow these dribbles to simulate hair. Rembrandt would apply thick paint, let it dry and then press the skin to form an impasto resembling golden brocade and chains. Turner would let his oils dry until he could squeeze the dried skins to form surface effects. Artists have always explored and exploited the fluidity of their mediums to find new ways to express themselves and their subjects.

This has evolved in contemporary times to where the fluidity of the medium is being explored by some artists as the source for new forms. This is particularly true in my work. The direct influences on the development of my work, and those painters central to what I refer to as The Fluid School in Western art, begins with Juan Miro (1893 - 1983). Miro explored the poured circle and dribble, and made use of these pourings as visual elements in his work. Hans Hofmann (1880 - 1966) and Jackson Pollock (1912 - 1956) also experimented with new forms of drawing and paint application. Pollock was introduced to the use of liquid paint by the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros at an experimental workshop in New York City in 1936, thereby discovering his signature drip drawing. Hofmann, who had also tried drawing with fluid dribbles, preferred the spontaneous palette-knifed grounds combined with his signature slabs of colour. In Hofmann's



Joseph Drapell
Gatekeeper, 2001
72 x 62 inches
Acrylic on canvas

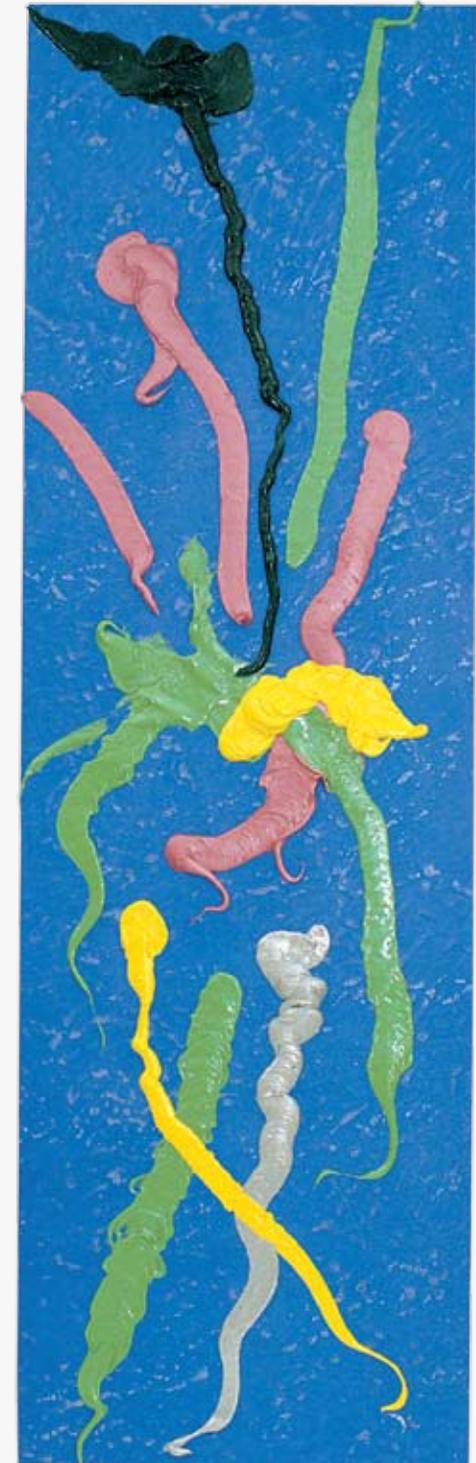


Roy Lerner
60 x 90 inches*
Acrylic on canvas

late work, he employed thinner applications in which he accepted and encouraged the drawing from the pooling of the washes, plus he also left the easel and began to work flat on the floor. Helen Frankenthaler (1928 -) poured her stains with the canvas flat, encouraging the poured shapes with brushes, but often accepting the fluidity of the initial pour and developing her imagery around these formations.

Morris Louis (1912 - 1962) recalled the young Frankenthaler's painting *Mountains and Sea*,¹ painted with washes of oil in 1952, as salutary in inspiring himself and the young Kenneth Noland (1924 -) to work with

washes. Louis became a major figure in the exploration of poured washes, working with Bocour's Magna Colour, a solvent based acrylic. He stained his colours into canvas, providing a directional structure for the motifs by orienting his canvases to control both the paints' direction and the forms the pourings would produce. Louis painted with a compositional motif, as did Noland who also began in the late '50s to experiment with staining. Rather than explore fluidity as a means of drawing expression, Noland soon opted for the geometry and more refined surface compositions in his circle paintings.



John Gittins
100 x 30 inches*
Acrylic on canvas

Jules Olitski (1922 - 2007), following a group of masterful early stain paintings that were composed of simplified shapes, began spraying colour in the air and allowing the colours to fuse on the canvas surface. This was not so much a fluid act, but one that did give rise to using a new tool, the spray gun, and of exploring the 'found' and the fusing possibilities that this offered. Later in his career, Olitski made works by throwing down globs of gel and thickened paint, causing them to form according to impact. He frequently used fluid washes and puddles to create layers in his work.

Larry Poons (1937 -) is one of the most radically adventurous exponents of the use of fluidity in his gravity driven Cascade Paintings of the 1970s. He hung a continuous length of canvas around the room, covering the walls on three sides and then cast buckets of paint across a canvas, allowing the paint to cascade down like a waterfall frozen in time. If Poons worked too long, the paint would become overloaded and slide down the canvas and he would have to wait before adding more layers. Poons took to preloading the canvas with globs, much like Olitski, and changing the direction of the cascade by the use of sticks placed under the canvas and leaning into the wall. Poons would work on this wall much like Pollock on the floor, until what was there satisfied him. He then selected mostly vertical rectangular compositions from these formations. Poons' work from this period is some of the most outstanding and adventurous painting by any artist of his generation. The freedom of expression in the act of painting, and the resulting sense of randomness in the painted formation of Poons' work, had a profound affect on my own search for a way to paint after our first meeting in New York in 1974.

All these artists exploited the fluidity of the medium and its natural properties by the way they set-up, handled and/or provided for its reception. Be it by the use of a spray gun, by guiding pours with a brush, by throwing paint with a bucket or by the orientation of the canvas, all these acts endeavoured to capture the behavior of the paint as fluid substance and the forms it could be made to become, all guided by the imagination of the artists. I refer to this pictorial evolution as the 'Fluid School' of painting



Jerald Webster
48 x 48 inches*
Acrylic on canvas

Throughout the history of oil painting, artists were often involved in the making of their own paint. This was part of the craft of being an artist...



Steven Brent
70 x 52 inches*
Acrylic on canvas

New Mediums and The Future of Process Painting

My work belongs to this Fluid School of painting, with one fundamental difference—I also cause the paint to behave differently by changing the physical composition of the medium.

I paint on the floor in large troughs, pouring large ponds (as Greenberg called them at the Triangle Workshop in 1982) of fluid paint, layer upon layer, and induce fissure-like crazing in the paint layers. These separations reveal colour through colour, and allow me to begin to create the compositional dynamics in the work. Once dry, the canvas is orientated on the wall, undulated, painted, cut and collaged to a unified conclusion.

Many artists today use custom paints or try their own mixes. Golden Artist Colors have extended the manufacturing process to accommodate many artists' wants, and make custom paints that offer some increased artistic potential. The fact remains that methylacrylate (acrylic) based paints are still relatively new, and there are many differing types of acrylic mediums and additives that exist which can affect their characteristics. These additives are generally unavailable to the artist except in small quantities of proprietary form, rendering only standardized possibilities for artistic innovation in the restructuring of the medium. Artistic conception and imagination expressed through the medium of paint are fundamental to new expression.

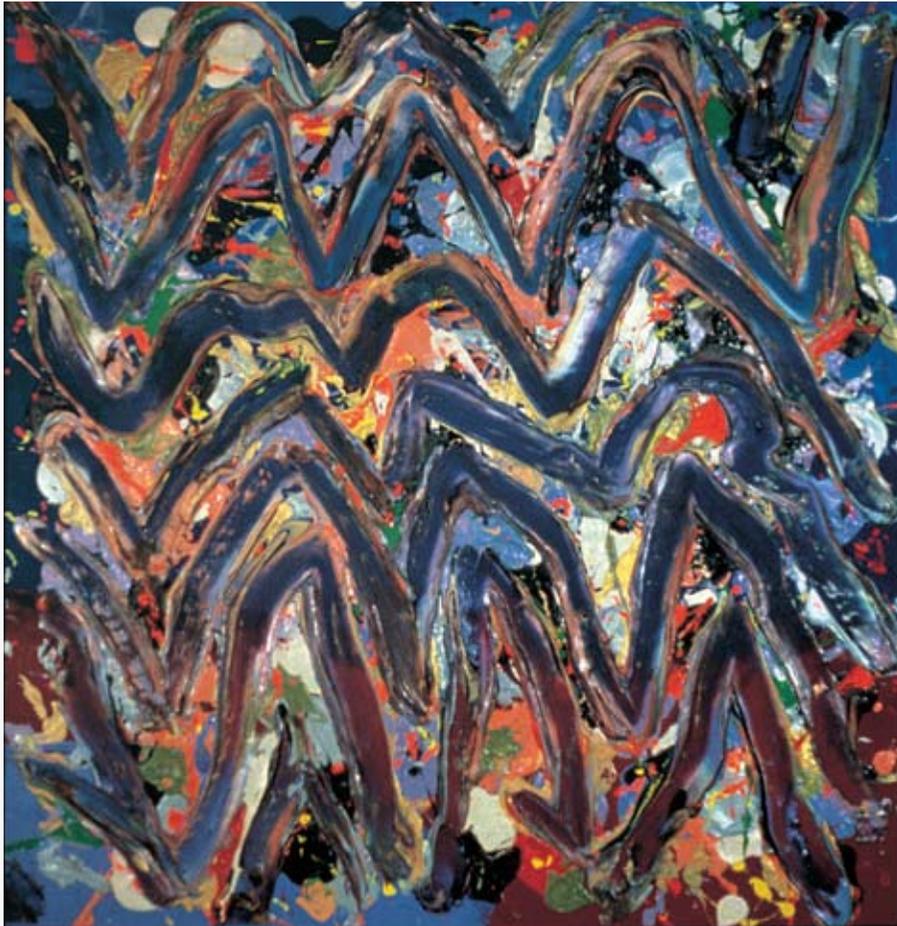
In 'Process Abstraction' the discovery of a new paint formula or custom mixes which might offer new formations could be critical to progress and innovation.

Throughout the history of oil painting, artists were often involved in the making of their own paint. This was part of the craft of being an artist, and as the fundamental ingredients were available they were able to vary the paint to their liking, often introducing new colours, oils, waxes and varnishes.

Many formulas are still available in *The Artists' Handbook* by Ralph Mayer for gesso and for many painting and glazing mediums in oil but little exists for acrylics. Ingredients and formulas for acrylics are not generally available to the artists whose only sources are usually common retail products from suppliers.

If innovation is to come by the way of intervention in the medium, by producing mediums other than the manufactured norm, then artists will need this information and access to materials. Presently, artists' access to materials is more limited than it used to be. This is a result of increasing materials safety issues and the lack of knowledge generally about synthetic mediums, which are by their nature far more complex and potentially hazardous if not handled correctly.

Much remains to be achieved by artists gaining greater possibilities in the invention with the acrylic mediums but this will require increased knowledge and accessibility to sources of raw materials.



Bruce Piermarini
Humpty Hump 1990
89 x 84 inches

Is innovation limited by the general availability of standard paint products? Only future painting and painters will determine that. My question is, with technological innovation so present in society, what options are available to artists to learn and be qualified to use raw acrylic mediums? Should universities offer courses in paint chemistry to painting students? I certainly believe there is merit in doing so and can see how such a course would aid students in their development.



Irene Neal
2000
80 x 30 inches*
Acrylic over board

Thoughts on Painting

Addendum



Rossa Bluff 1988
72 x 25 ½ inches

Artistic Principles

The discussion of what makes a work of art a ‘work of art’, as opposed to a dabble or didactic sign, is one that my students often raise. They ask if visual unity and aesthetics matter, as they see so much art that seems to pay little regard to these principles. I believe for art to be art, it must necessarily be felt, and involve the use of visual principles, what artists often refer to as a visual language, a language that has been historically developed and passed down over the centuries. I stress the need for these visual principles and relationships to be maintained, irrespective of stylistic pursuit, in my work and the work of my students. These are the tools and the life force through which artists express their feelings. In the end, all great art possesses this human emotive weight, regardless of its stylistic pursuit, and that is the true measure of its value. Art reveals our spirit and humanity.

Visual Fundamentals

In contemporary visual education this language is mostly referred to as visual fundamentals, foundation studies, visual dynamics, and basic design, and is taught through introductory courses. These are studio based courses, mostly taught through the observation of visual phenomenon: line, shape, two and three-dimensional illusion, figure-ground relationship and colour. Although the principles are centuries old and have been passed down through apprentices, more recently they have been derived from the teachings at the German Bauhaus School of Design (1919-1933). The Bauhaus School pioneered the teaching of the basic visual principles common to all art practices, including painting, sculpture, architecture, film, photography, ceramics, graphic, interior, fashion, and industrial design. British art schools reinstated such introductory courses during the 1950s and ‘60s, which soon spread throughout North American art programmes.³ They continue to be taught in many art schools and universities today.

The most fundamental artistic principle in creating a tensioned pictorial experience is what is referred to as a figure-ground relationship. This involves the artist judging the relative balance or tension between two elements in a picture: the figure and the ground, or background. Making these areas perceptually equally important creates a sense of activity and balanced tension that contributes to the expressive power and ultimately the unity in a work. The simplest example of this would be a pattern like a chessboard, as opposed to balancing areas of differing asymmetric proportions, which is more artistically challenging. Joseph Albers, in his book *The Interaction of Color*, referred to this as the “Contrast of Extension”, the judging of how much of one colour will balance another. The operative word here is judging, as this is a subjective exercise accompanied by many other factors as to what the role of these colours in the painting are. *Does the head sit on the shoulders or are the red buttons sitting on the green jacket?* This balancing involves the three main contrasts of colour, tone, temperature, and intensity, plus all the elements of drawing and surface. When all of these elements are in a balanced figure-ground relationship the work will develop a sense of visual tension. When this unified tension is not present, the viewing of a work can be a disparate, detached, and a fragmented visual experience of the literal sum of the parts. The successful visual interaction of the parts will create energy, tension, and light, greater than the sum of the parts. This gives what we refer to as a visual life to the work, a life that will be found at the heart of all creative art.

Art vs. Signage

A didactic sign does not have as its main goal a profound, long-term contemplative, original aesthetic experience. It may be aesthetically striking, but its objective is to be identified or read literally. Mostly it is temporal, to be absorbed quickly, and functionally designed to succeed in its task of communicating an immediate and mostly short-term message. If a work

of visual art dissolves into such pragmatics and becomes a didactic experience, it loses some of its contemplative essence — a lasting aesthetic experience over time. Art and design are different in that while they essentially use the same language, in design form follows function while in art the form follows aesthetically nourishing content. Creativity's stance is towards individuality and invention by using the qualities of the medium to evoke or communicate feelings by inventing new forms that ultimately progress and make us question our taste. Art confronts us and forces us to explore our senses, asking us to judge, value or question the nature of what we are seeing. A didactic experience is something that generally refers to the knowledge of something we already know, or is instructional, and, although it uses visual elements to do this, it does not demand the contemplation a work of art does, but rather relies on quick recognition. Not to say that some designs grow on you with time, but that is not their primary objective.

The Act of Seeing — active vs. passive

Seeing as an active vs. passive act is something that is particular to the visual arts. Directing ones eyes to experience the visual activity of an inanimate object and contemplating the experience is a learned practice, refined and developed over time by continued experiencing. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) writings on art and the aesthetical writings of American critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) are founded on the act of seeing, experiencing and judging, allowing the work of art to provide the basis for that judgment. For the artist, learning to follow ones work by such seeing is the key to understanding and reaching the work's conclusions. Despite ones starting point and best intentions, in the creation of a work of art, the art will reveal its inadequacies and successes, and through contemplation and imaginings will continue to suggest changes until a point of resolution or abandonment is reached. For the artist, collector or admirer alike, the experiencing, judging and comparing of the quality

and originality of works of art is an active engagement in seeing, the meanings of which are revealed over time.

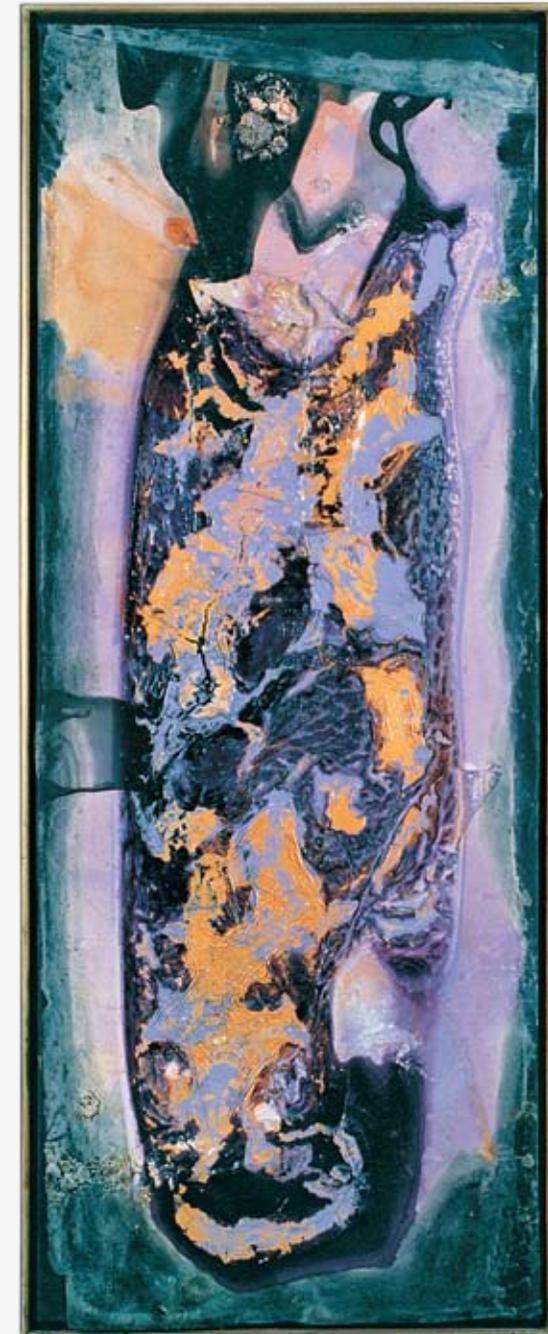
Henri Matisse on Seeing, 1953

“Creation is the artists’ true function; where there is no creation there is no art. But it would be a mistake to ascribe this creative power to an inborn talent. In art, the genuine creator is not just a gifted being, but a man who has succeeded in arranging, for their appointed end, a complex of activities, of which the work of art is the outcome.

Thus for the artist creation begins with vision. To see is itself a creative operation, requiring an effort. Everything that we see in our daily life is more or less distorted by acquired habits, and this is perhaps more evident in an age like ours when cinema posters and magazines present us everyday with a flood of ready-made images which are to the eye what prejudices are to the mind.

The effort needed to see things without distortion takes something very like courage; and this courage is essential to the artist, who has to look at everything as if he saw it for the first time: he has to look at life as he did when he was a child and if he loses that faculty, he cannot express himself in an original, that is, a personal way”... That is the sense, so it seems to me, in which art may be said to imitate nature, namely, by the life that the creative worker infuses into the work of art. The work will then appear as fertile and as possessed of the same power to thrill, the same resplendent beauty as we find in the works of nature.

Great love is needed to achieve this effect, a love capable of inspiring and sustaining that patient striving towards truth, that glowing warmth and that analytic profundity that accompany the birth of any work of art. But is not love the origin of all creation?”



Plunge 1988
84 ¾ x 31 ¾ inches

Mainstream and Alternative Practices

Alternative practices to painting and sculpture have become a focus of activity in most art galleries today. Text, theory, and ideas are increasingly given value over the traditional (as they are now referred to) aesthetics of the material disciplines of drawing, painting, and sculpture. These centuries old practices are today frequently assailed as old-fashioned modes of engagement. This is nothing new — when I attended art school in London in the 1960s I frequently heard that “painting is dead”. This dismissal has raised its head in the last few decades yet these practices continue unabated. Even if less celebrated than they once were, they in turn become ‘alternate practices’.

What is so often not acknowledged today is that all art has content and a conceptualized basis. The engagement of the human spirit in the activity of creation is in itself based in thought and action. The operative here being that the idea is being realized in a visual form we call art. It is as if what we are really dealing with is the way things are discussed and packaged, and the discursive trend is for speaking about artistic practice.

Today, many artists place their emphasis on social political concepts, ideas and agendas, often accompanying or arguing for their work with explanatory texts, dismissing the formal use of the medium for aesthetic expression as unimportant or secondary. In doing so, they often seek the viewer’s identification, acceptance, and agreement with the idea or concept of the work rather than their aesthetic appreciation, causing the work to be employed didactically. In centuries past, when church and state commissioned works that were conceptually loaded but were aesthetically delivered, this *‘form vs. content’* was never a problem. Abdicating or relegating aesthetic experience as unimportant has allowed for a free-for-all with no measure of visual quality, so evident in the profundity of art today. In such a climate of immediate gratification, fashion, ideology, and politics will inevitably distort the public’s focus away from true art. It is far easier for most people to believe and understand than to make the effort to perceive. In fact many have not learned to ‘see’ or perceive visually. This, together with the decline in taste in the 1970s, away from aesthetically-based work in all styles, has made its sale and funding increasingly difficult as social issues have overridden any sense of true artistic merit.

Cultural Centralism

In Canada, we administer cultural funding by a centralized adjudication. Most Canadian museums are not independently funded and must seek funding through grants from the Canadian Government’s Canada Council for the Arts. Proposals are submitted on a project-by-project basis to be adjudicated in Ottawa, where it is decided what exhibitions will or will not be shown in the provinces. This cultural centralism, practiced in Canada

since the 1980s, removes the autonomy of provincial institutions, and I believe this to be detrimental to regional artistic development, diversity and originality. To be successful, grant applicants and curators must satisfy the criteria of ad hoc committees for funding, rather than receiving block grants and being allowed to program what they think best, as was the case before the present system. Although these committees include a regional representative (one representative for the Prairies, consisting of three provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta), this process does not encourage museums to curate exhibitions that, while pertinent to their community, have potentially no chance of success with these granting agencies. This policy and the need to attract ticket buying patrons has tended to encourage the galleries towards the sensational ‘bells and whistles’ types of shows, and to alternative modes of artistic behaviour. The exhibiting of permanent collections of painting and sculpture, which have no buzz, remains largely unsupported, and the artistic evolution of communities becomes more limited as these collections languish in storage and are rarely seen. Access to this work, which is vital to students and artists young and old in their continuing development, is difficult. As an educator, this access is essential to my teaching. This is largely what makes studying in the provinces problematic, as these resources, even when present in the community, are not on display as they are in the major centres. Nothing beats the benefit derived by the viewing of actual works of art. Reproductions can only provide a superficial encounter full of distortions and untruths. To experience art you have to be able to see it.

Historical Narratives

In centuries past, works of art have expressed ideas without compromising aesthetics by using the power of their visual imagery to do so. Peter Paul Rubens, Michelangelo, Francisco de Goya, El Greco, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Henri Matisse, Claude Monet, Vincent van Gogh, Chaim Soutine, to name just a few, have all made aesthetically powerful work with strong narrative content. Today’s seeming abandonment of these aesthetic goals (in some circles), from my perspective, is like fraud. As the sayings go, “talk is cheap”, and “actions speak louder than words”. It is far easier to theorize than to actualize a successful work of art. But of course this all depends on whether you agree that art is a visual language, notwithstanding that it may carry with it many other messages. The Abstract Expressionists, the Color Field painters and the Post Painterly Abstractionist works are all full of content, be this expressionistic or sublimely emotionally delivered. The New New Painters continue to create work full of content, inspired by positive ideals and uplifting aims. In the realm of other media, Bill Viola’s video work is a contemporary example of media used with visual intensity and narrative content. It is possible to express ideas and make work with innovative material and aesthetic content. It is unfortunate that there is not more public demand for this.

Form and Content

A popular assertion that has persisted throughout my career is that art that focuses on the formal visual aesthetic experience, particularly abstraction, is absent of content. Abstraction was assailed the 1970s as being hedonistic and as having no content.⁴ Presumably this was because it does not represent identifiable things with strong visual handles that provide an obvious narrative identifiable with the outside world. Since all art uses visual principles, this lack of appreciation for art, that may focus more on the drawing, colour, and surface for its expression, being perceived as having no content, is prejudicial and misinformed. Describing abstract painting as elitist, as is often the case, compares with the outlawing of abstraction by those authoritarian regimes who enforced social narratives, abstraction being seen as a threat to society, primarily due to the independent thinking, invention and free expression that abstraction brings about. There is no limit imposed on quality and who may participate in the attempt to achieve it.

Content is inherent in any type of manifestation as all things exist in relativity. It is impossible to make or do anything, including art, outside of context and reference, willed or not. How good this reference or content is, is a factor in the work's overall quality. But artistic ability and the originality of any work of art is still the determinable factor of major artistic achievement. In abstract art, the fact that this content (the literal handles) may not be up front makes its reception understandably more difficult for some viewers. It depends also on the viewers' ability to sense the emotive content in the work, rather than what the work looks like, what the work feels like. The question might also be asked as to whether works that are representational are any more appreciated for their form than abstract art, or just superficially accepted through recognition rather than any true aesthetic appreciation.

The Marketplace

Collectors who have more art than they can hang are rare. Most who purchase art stop at the furnishing of their interiors. The days of royalty as the major art patrons, commissioning and appointing artists to their court and acting as the connoisseurs of taste, have passed. Today more than ever art has become a fashionable commodity to be acquired and perhaps invested in. Traditional aesthetic values in contemporary work have given way to market hype, and prices do not often coincide with my assessment of the quality of the art itself. As confusing as this may appear, there remains, just as with the stock market, a time for re-evaluation, a change in taste and future/present market correction. History's long time frame has a way of objectifying true art from

the fashionable trends of minor art, irrespective of past investment, as was the case in the 19th century when a Monet sold for a fraction of the price of the leading stars of the day like Bouguereau (1825-1905). Bouguereau painted classical subjects, the female body, genre and mythological themes. His idealized world and almost photo-realistic style was popular with the rich and famous in his time. Although famous in his time, today Bouguereau's work receives relatively little attention compared with the Impressionists and his past values are a fraction of those paid today for a Monet.

In the 1950s it was difficult for New York art dealers to sell major abstraction, but some did make successful careers in doing so. Among the most renowned were Betty Parsons (1900-1982), whose gallery opened in 1948, and showcased work by Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barnett Newman, Hans Hofmann and Clyfford Still. Also successful was French and Company, who hosted shows selected by Greenberg. Tibor de Nagy (1936-) opened his gallery in 1950, and André Emmerich (1924-2007) did likewise in 1954. Despite the critical praise of the critic Clement Greenberg, champion of Jackson Pollock and the new Abstraction, the slowly expanding post-war marketplace demanded more art, and art that could be easily understood and made. Pop art, Op art, and Minimalism made their entry, and Leo Castelli's (1907-1999) gallery took centre stage throughout the 1960s and '70s. Greenberg became an increasingly controversial figure, the target of praise and rejection by dealers, artists and collectors alike for "speaking his eye" and not necessarily endorsing the market favourites. The controversy over the merit of his criticism, fourteen years after his death, remains. But he is, without question, held by many to be the most germinal and insightful writer of his time.

By the mid 1960s, many art dealers either faded in their attempts to continue to sell abstract art or moved to a more conceptually based abstraction. Castelli eclipsed them all when he embraced the demand for a more marketable and easily understood art. The baby boomer "yuppie" generation had disposable income and wanted the art of their time. They identified with the big booming economy of the U.S.A. expressed in Pop Art that, together with Op Art and Minimalism, took the lead. Aesthetic detachment, especially that associated with Abstraction, faded from prominence.⁵ The marketing of artists as product became as much a reality as the art itself: artists like Andy Warhol, whose "15 minutes of fame" and name became synonymous with his art, developed a cult following and reached celebrity status. This popular art-star market has held sway for the past 50 years. The fall out being that most of the major abstract masters, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Mark Rothko, Clifford Still and Hans Hofmann, sell at auctions well below the value of many of their contemporaries,⁶ and their works are rarely on display in the permanent collections of major centers of art. This has begun to change

recently, as seen in the case of Rothko with a 70 million dollar sale of his work last year but in the majority their work remains relatively under-priced for its quality.

Postmodernism

The era of Postmodernism (a term that has rendered neither clear definition nor stylistic clarity) has produced an array of diverse practices, many of which pay little or no attention to aesthetics or offer, in my opinion, much quality or originality. The term Postmodernism was first used in 1949, as dissatisfaction arose with modern architecture's so-called "International Style," which saw a return to surface decoration and historical revival. By the mid 1970s the term had worked its way through critical theory, philosophy, architecture, literature and culture. Although it is a general reaction against modernism, postmodernism tends to refer to a cultural, intellectual, or artistic state lacking a clear central hierarchy or organizing principle, embodying extreme complexity, diversity, contradiction, ambiguity, interreferentiality and interconnectedness. Such were the philosophies of Jacques Derrida whose poststructuralist ideas assailed the bourgeois elitist culture he perceived in modernism. In art, Postmodernism became a label for anything wishing to either be current or appear so, while at the same time avoiding the scrutiny of aesthetic values associated with modernism. This seemingly new freedom has produced a smattering of original work, but mainly it has encouraged a plethora of novelty with little to no real artistic development. Postmodernism in Europe has now faded from focus. In North America, it is in its last gasp.

Installation, Performance and Video

Often installations, performances or screenings argue for a spatial world in which the "real world" enters into interaction with the artwork, often by means of real objects in new or everyday settings. In these works, the artist is the guide, picking out what we should observe. As all encompassing and agreeably liberal as this may be, it is that very inclusiveness which often confuses the viewer in determining the true world from the work of art. The real world's normalcy makes it difficult to tell where the art begins and the real world ends, as was the case with Marcel Duchamp's urinal sculpture and many of his readymades. I have trouble getting past the obviousness of the reality of these objects. By rejecting the need to select and decide to resolve an entity aesthetically, the real world is left to be the art, which it obviously is not. While the world may be full of aesthetic qualities, I do not find this compares with the experience one can perceive from a single work of art that expresses an artist's invention through material manipulation. Such work exhibits an "otherness" from the real world, a decided spatial relationship with an experience that

can involve and surprise. Art, through repeated experiencing, can enjoyably heighten our sense of discovery of the new or good. This is fundamental to the experience of art that society has, up until now, considered as being high or advanced — art which through experiencing and actively "seeing" envelops us, and in doing so may extend our taste.

Without Prejudice

There are no limits on the types of artistic practices possible if they can achieve the artistic distancing from literal normalcy. It is not a question of whether practices and art forms fit into some narrow definition of sculpture, print, or painting, but rather what the quality of the experience, as art, is. As Greenberg said, "It is not a matter of whether it is art, but whether it is good art".

The process of invention, which proceeds and/or accompanies artistic progress, forces artists to do away with conventions, having first mastered them, to arrive at points of fresh encounter. It asks of artists and viewers alike to remove all prejudices, and to find within themselves the strength of emotion to see, feel and invent new forms with which to build new visions. The intellectualization of this act is one aspect of the artistic process, which then needs to be fulfilled by the actualization in material terms. Without this materialization, the idea remains purely theoretical. This, in most studio practices, is only a starting point for the artist. Arriving at the conclusion of what may be a hypothesis is only possible through the process of making art and putting that theory into practice. That is where the true artistic test is met.

Much of today's practices stop at the theoretical stage and argue their case from a Duchampian anti-art position, that it is not the object that matters but the thought it provokes. El Greco seems to have been able to address both quite well, so why is it apparently so hard or unnecessary to do this nowadays? I think we are being cheated when the hors d'oeuvres are dressed up as the full meal deal — and then of course there is the dessert, the lasting after-glow that all great things carry with them.

Graham Peacock

July 8, 2008

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

“Underappreciated,” 2005-12-01 catalogue review by Piri Halasz (New York NY USA) of *Clement Greenberg: A Critic's Collection* by Bruce Guenther

Greenberg was always controversial during his lifetime. He lived to see widespread acceptance in the 1950s of his endorsements during the '40s of Pollock and the rest of abstract expressionism, but his admiration for the color-field painters of the '60s was always a minority taste, with many more art lovers during that period favoring pop art and its ramifications - op, kinetic art, minimal, etc. (I say this upon the basis of having covered the art scene for Time magazine in the '60s, having continued to write about art since, and having come to the conclusion since receiving my doctorate in art history that pop was essentially a reaction against abstract expressionism, while color-field painting and modernist abstraction, which carries on its tradition in the present, are the true continuance of the avant-garde). Since the '60s, the greater popularity of the descendants of pop and its ramifications made it increasingly difficult for the art that Greenberg admired to receive the recognition it deserves, especially the art made by the younger artists. But majority taste has been wrong many times in the past, and this is particularly true in the present, when critical judgments in general are so often considered less important than how well a work of art is doing in the marketplace. I like to think this situation will improve in the future, but in the meantime, the reader will be able to see in this book what really good & truly avant-garde art looks like.

- 1 *Mountains and Sea* was inspired by a trip to Nova Scotia, but it could as easily be seen as a still life rather than a landscape or not read referentially at all. The picture in the catalogue looks as if it could be a reproduction of an aquarelle.

It was the 1951 show of Pollock's black and white paintings at the Betty Parsons Gallery that had the profound influence on pushing Frankenthaler to translate her own sense of fluidity and spontaneity into the staining and pouring of pure pigment onto canvas. Pollock originated the stained line in post-war art, but it was Frankenthaler alone who first was able to expand upon the implications of this calligraphy. Her entire canvas field became a conscious awakening to the power of color performing. Such works as *Western Dream* (1957), *Before the Caves* (1958) and *Mother Goose Melody* (1959) epitomize that sensation of color taking form, coming into being and creating a location. The technique of staining is quite opposite to the more rough and macho styles of paint construction dictated by the Abstract Expressionism of de Kooning and Kline.

- 2 *The Artist's Handbook*, of materials and techniques by Ralph Mayer is published by Penguin Books in 1949, revised in 1957, 1970, 1981 and 1991. ISBN 0-670-83701-6
- 3 Art Education in England was radically changed in 1961, following the Coldstream committee report and with the Summerson Council's inception of a new Diploma in Art and Design. These changes were informed by the efforts of the artists Victor Pasmore, Harry Thubron and Tom Hudson. Pasmore had introduced a Bauhaus inspired foundation course at Newcastle in 1954, and ran the Leeds College of Art and summer schools at Scarborough, assisted by Harry Thubron (1915-1985) and Tom Hudson (1922-1997). These courses became known as Basic Design and started a movement, encouraged by Sir Herbert Read, to modernize art education, linking art and design education to common understandings of basic principles. Thubron became Head of Sunderland School of Art from 1950-55, Head of Fine Art at Leeds College of Art from 1955-64, Lancaster from 1964-66, and Leicester from 1966-68. He was Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois in 1965-66, and in the 1970s taught part-time at Goldsmiths College of Art in London. Hudson became Head of Foundation Studies at Leicester, and created courses to integrate art and design education. So successful was this

program that “The Visual Adventure” exhibition of students' work toured to the Royal Festival Hall and the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1963. Hudson lectured all over the world, became a consultant to Unesco and art education adviser to the government of Brazil. In 1964 he was appointed Director of Cardiff College of Art, and Cardiff's programme attracted the attention of teachers from all over the world. By the mid 70s, Basic Design courses had lost sway in England and had drifted into an unstructured system of do-your-own-thing.

I am a graduate of Goldsmiths, and undertook the very first year of this new programme in 1961. In 1969 on my arrival at the university of Alberta, together with Professors Jon Knowlton (Yale), Philip Darrah (Slade), and Michael Travers (Leeds), we spent many years developing a visual fundamentals programme based on these Bauhausian and Basic Design principles. This programme continued successfully until 2004, when the course was divided into Fine Art Fundamentals and Design Fundamentals, re-establishing the very boundaries that the original course objectives sought to break down.?

- 4 “Pure, Uncluttered Hedonism,” by Robert Hughes, *Time Magazine*. Monday, May 02, 1977. “Noland,” writes Curator Diane Waldman in her catalogue essay, “ranks with Delacroix and the impressionists among the great color painters of the modern era. Unquestionably heir to Matisse and Klee in the realm of color expression, he is to his generation what they were to their own.” This litany might have read better ten years ago than it does today; it is incantatory rubbish. Delacroix was not a “color painter” in any sense of the word that can be applied to Noland. He was a superb colorist whose art was occupied with matters other than the disinterested play of color on a flat surface. It had to do with the complexities of drawing from life, with adapting the lessons of Rubens, with theatricality, lust, tigers and Arabs, the problems of history painting and of allegory. Delacroix's success as a colourist cannot be separated from the wider ambitions of his painting. Neither can that of Matisse or the impressionists. Nor is there any real reason to suppose Noland could actually be to his generation what Matisse was to his. The scope and meaning of his art are too narrow and abstract for that. It takes more than talent and stripes—however delectable the color—to become a master.
- 5 Comment by Graham Peacock
Abstraction has continued to be a vital practice and has developed in The Eastern United States, New York and Boston region, and within Canada in Toronto, Montreal, Saskatoon, Edmonton and Vancouver. The Painters Eleven, Toronto, 1953; The Regina Five in Saskatoon 1961; The Triangle Workshops 1982; The Boston Group. The Edmonton Contemporary Artists' Society 1992, and the New New Painters 1989 are all indications of this continued vitality of Abstract Painting and Sculpture in East-West, North America.
- 6 Major abstraction, Louis, Hofmann, still sell for modest sums in comparison to contemporaries such as Damien Hirst and of course Andy Warhol.