

## NEW YORK PAINTING CIRCA 1968 NOTES TOWARD THE MISSING HISTORY OF EXPERIMENTAL ABSTRACTION

David Reed

A GREAT DEAL OF CRITICAL ATTENTION has been paid to the fact that the late 1960s was an exciting and innovative time for art. In a relatively brief period, Pop, Minimalism, Conceptual art, language art, video and film works, sound works, Earthworks, performance, and Happenings were developing more or less simultaneously in New York. And yet, even though the experimental painting of this time had a relationship to these other forms of art, it has not been included in historical discussions of the period: art historians and curators have overlooked a crucial area of investigation. This may well be the reason that the situation in painting is muddled and confused, while the work of so many young artists involved with installation, film, and performance can be put into historical context. At this point, it is even difficult to come up with common terms and issues in discussions of painting. In this light, the period of the late 1960s and the 1970s can be viewed as a wound, a break in the history of painting that needs to be repaired if the medium is to develop with an articulated historical awareness. When its history has been repressed, how can current experimental painting be understood?

RICHARD BELLAMY

In an attempt to outline this missing history, I will write about twenty-three abstract paintings by twenty-two artists bought on the advice of Richard Bellamy for the Mari and James A. Michener Collection.<sup>1</sup> Rolf Ricke, a gallerist from Cologne who worked with some of the same artists, called Bellamy "the greatest art dealer of the twentieth century."<sup>2</sup> Bellamy, a unique and charismatic man, was known for his discriminating and innovative eye and his ability to discover artists who would go on to achieve great success and historical importance. In his legendary Green Gallery, which closed in 1965, he was the first to show the Pop artists Claes Oldenburg, George Segal, and James Rosenquist, as well as the Minimal artists Donald Judd, Robert Morris, and Dan Flavin, among many others. Bellamy's independent and opinionated voice was one of the most influential in the 1960s New York art world. Artists loved and respected him because they recognized how much he cared about art. I wish we had recordings of his conversations with James Michener. What did he say when he advised Michener to add these works to his collection?

All twenty-three paintings purchased under the advice of Bellamy were created in the five-year period between 1964 and 1969 and purchased for the Michener Collection between 1964 and 1970 (with the exception of the second painting by Dan Christensen, which Michener bought at auction in 1972). All of the paintings, except one, as far as I can tell, cost less than \$1,000. (The Ralph Humphrey cost

Kenneth Showell, *Besped*, 1967  
(detail, figure 4)

ARTIST	TITLE OF WORK	SIZE OF WORK	YEAR MADE	BORN	PURCHASED THROUGH
Baer, Jo	<i>Horizontals Tiered</i>	52 × 72" ea.	66	29	artist
Budd, David	<i>Gee-Bee Slipstream</i>	84 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> × 90 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> "	64	27–91	Green Gallery
Canin, Martin	<i>Diptych #5 and #6</i>	56 × 112"	67	27	Goldowsky
Christensen, Dan (2)	Untitled	100 × 100"	Sept. 66	42	Goldowsky
	Untitled	100 × 100"	Nov. 66	42	Goldowsky
Conley, Steve	<i>Imperio II</i>	84 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 60"	66	37	Goldowsky
Corse, Mary	Untitled	108 <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> × 108 <sup>5</sup> / <sub>8</sub> "	69	45	Goldowsky
Cote, Alan	<i>Tocqueville</i>	100 × 120"	69	37	artist
Diao, David	Untitled	87 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> × 87 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> "	68	43	Bellamy
Humphrey, Ralph	Untitled	54 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 108 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> "	68	32–90	Bykert
Lipsky, Pat	<i>Clear Music</i>	74 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> × 112 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> "	69	41	artist
Lloyd, Elliot	Untitled	94 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 73 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> "	68	37	Bellamy
Logemann, Jane	Untitled	54 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 54 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> " ea.	69	42	Bellamy
Lozano, Lee	<i>Ream</i>	78 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> × 96"	64	30–99	Bellamy
Marden, Brice	<i>Fave</i>	72 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 66 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> "	68–69	38	artist
Pettet, William	Untitled	80 × 80"	67	42	Bellamy
Showell, Kenneth	<i>Besped</i>	108 × 90"	67	39–97	Bellamy
Stafford, Lawrence	Untitled	72 × 96"	68	38	Bellamy
Torreano, John	<i>I</i>	78" diameter	68	41	Bellamy
Tuttle, Richard	<i>Light Pink Octagon</i>	56 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> × 53"	67	41	Parsons
Williams, Neil	<i>Ship's Complement</i>	73 × 110 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> "	64	34	Bellamy
Wofford, Philip	<i>H.C.E.</i>	93 × 76"	67	35	Bellamy
Young, Peter	<i>Capitalist Masterpiece #26</i>	96 × 132"	68	40	Bellamy

Figure 1. Abstract painters born after 1927 whose work James Michener purchased on the advice of Richard Bellamy between 1964 and 1972.

\$1,600.) Only five of the twenty-two artists are women, which reflects the strong bias against women painters that existed in the 1960s—a bias that continues to this day.

## TWO GENERATIONS

I find it useful to divide the artists whose work Bellamy advised Michener to buy into two generations—the first born around 1930 and the second born around 1940 (figure 1). Entering the art world at different moments and at different ages, these two generations had distinct experiences, though they shared similar concerns.

The three artists from the 1930s generation—Jo Baer (b. 1929), Ralph Humphrey (1932–1990), and Lee Lozano (1930–1999)—were especially important examples, even pioneers, for the younger artists. Michener added their work to the collection when they were in their mid- to late thirties, at which point their paintings were fairly well known. Each had exhibited in several shows that demonstrated their works' development. While their paintings are very different from one another, Baer, Humphrey, and Lozano all were caught historically between modernism and a subsequent moment, resulting in a compressed, complex maturation for each body of work. I would like to write a paragraph about each of these artists before addressing the younger painters and the characteristics of what I like to call experimental abstract painting.

Lee Lozano cannot be understood as just a painter; she must be considered in relation to performance, Conceptual, and language artists as well. Her work progressed with extreme intensity, seeming to cram the life's effort of a modernist painter into just a few years. In the early 1960s Lozano created a group of paintings focusing on body

parts and internal/external perceptions that was informed by an awareness of sexual and gender politics. These paintings are related in a striking way to the figurative paintings that Philip Guston started at the end of the 1960s. Lozano then moved into painting large images of tools, continuing to incorporate sexual and political references in an indirect way, after which time her work became more and more abstract, culminating in the series of Wave Paintings from 1967 to 1970. Lozano made

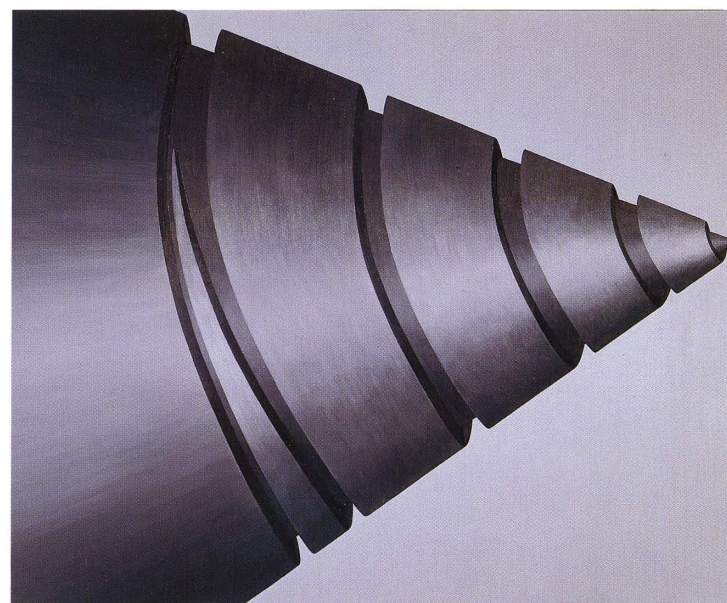


Figure 2. Lee Lozano, *Ream*, 1964; oil on canvas, 78<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 96 in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1968.92

*Ream* (1964, figure 2)—the painting in the Michener Collection of an oversized ream, a carpentry tool, which conveys a sensation of power with phallic connotations—at the moment of that change from tool imagery to abstraction. The movement of the pointed, triangular form slams so powerfully against the right side of the canvas that it creates an almost unbearable tension. It seems amazing that the force of this movement does not shatter the painting. Lozano insisted on finishing each painting in one sitting, repeatedly brushing paint—wet into wet—until she had built up the surface into a stringy, reflective relief. Because of this unusual surface, the values and even the hues change as one views the painting from different distances and angles, causing the forms to turn, move, and shift. The surface seems mechanical rather than handmade, and the cold gray has the mood of an industrial wasteland. I relate the color to the color and mood of Andy Warhol’s contemporaneous disaster paintings.

During these years, Jo Baer was one of the few artists to have the courage and independence of mind to forcefully defend painting. In 1967 she wrote a letter to *Artforum* arguing against the criticisms of painting leveled by Donald Judd and Philip Leider. The painting in the Michener Collection, *Horizontals Tiered [Vertical Diptych]* (1966, figure 3), one of her classic works, is a stacked diptych. Each canvas has a narrow black border that starts slightly inside its outer edge. The centers of the two canvases are white, and inside the black border there are thinner grey/green bands that have a slightly more reflective surface. This grey/green is a very odd color that seems to turn the interior white into light and create a slight space inside the black borders. Despite its reductive geometric form, I do not think the painting can be considered Minimalist, since there is no sense of a whole. How can there be when there are two canvases? Everything is thrown into question by the doubling—nothing can remain in focus. In the early 1970s Baer often painted around the side edges of her canvases—an innovation that was very influential. The slight indentation of the black borders in *Horizontals Tiered [Vertical Diptych]*, which leaves a very narrow white band along the outer edge, seems to prefigure this later development in her work.

Ralph Humphrey’s evolution is related to Baer’s in that he also moved from making flat monochromes to variously shaped, three-dimensional paintings that project as much as a foot off the wall and are painted around the sides. Humphrey’s work went through many different stages, and a major retrospective is needed to help understand its varied and multifaceted development. The Michener Collection’s *Untitled* (1968, not illustrated) is a horizontal double square with rounded edges that is divided by eight vertical slices or slots into nine vertical sections. As in the painting by Baer, the colors produce a sense of light. (Light was one of Humphrey’s major themes, although the surfaces of his canvases are even more sensitive than Baer’s.) In the later 1970s Humphrey introduced playful figurative forms into his works, some depicting open windows and billowing curtains. I have often thought that I could feel the wind on my face, blowing out of these paintings.

\* \* \* \*

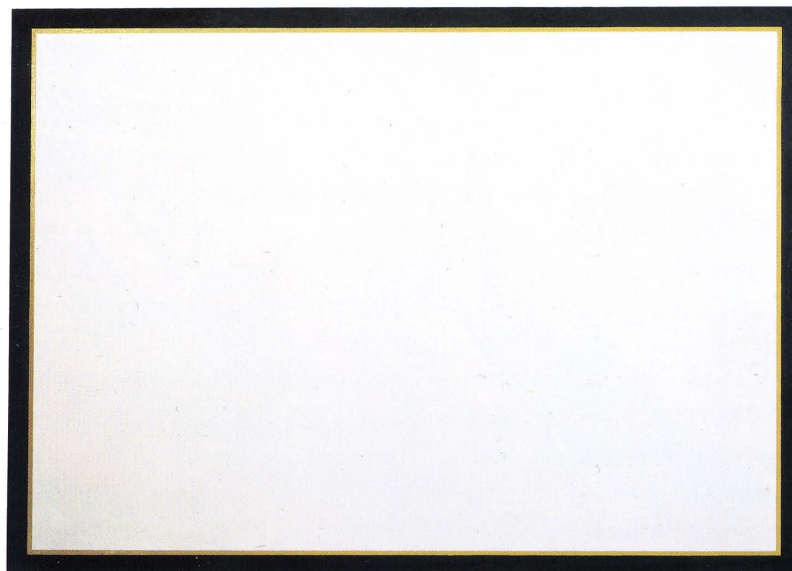
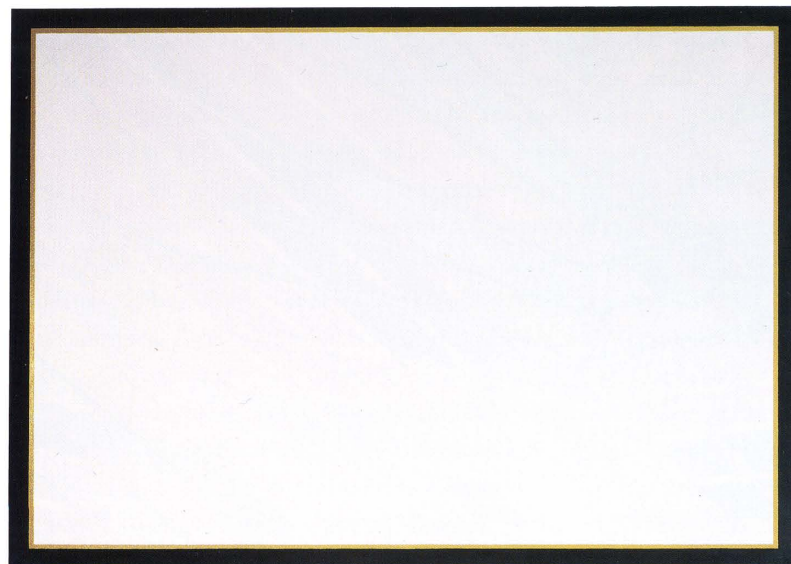


Figure 3. Jo Baer, *Horizontals Tiered [Vertical Diptych]*, 1966; oil and synthetic resin on canvas, each panel, 52 x 72 in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1968.31

In contrast to his pattern with the artists from the 1930s generation, Michener bought the paintings of the 1940s generation of artists when they were very young (almost all were still in their twenties), often before or at the time of their first one-person shows. In many cases, Michener’s purchase was their first major sale, and indeed, this is true of three of the six artists that I interviewed: David Diao, John Torreano, and Dan Christensen.<sup>3</sup> In this light, Bellamy’s and Michener’s studio visits must have been memorable events. Whether by his own initiative or at Michener’s request, Bellamy must have made a point of taking Michener to the studios of unproven, unknown artists. Michener bought some of the paintings, such as those by Torreano, Christensen, Diao, Ken Showell, and William Pettet, so early in the artists’ careers that they are examples of work that predate the paintings for which they became known. In other cases, Michener bought now-classic works, such as those by Alan Cote, Brice Marden, Richard Tuttle, Peter Young, Mary Corse, and Pat Lipsky. In view of the risks

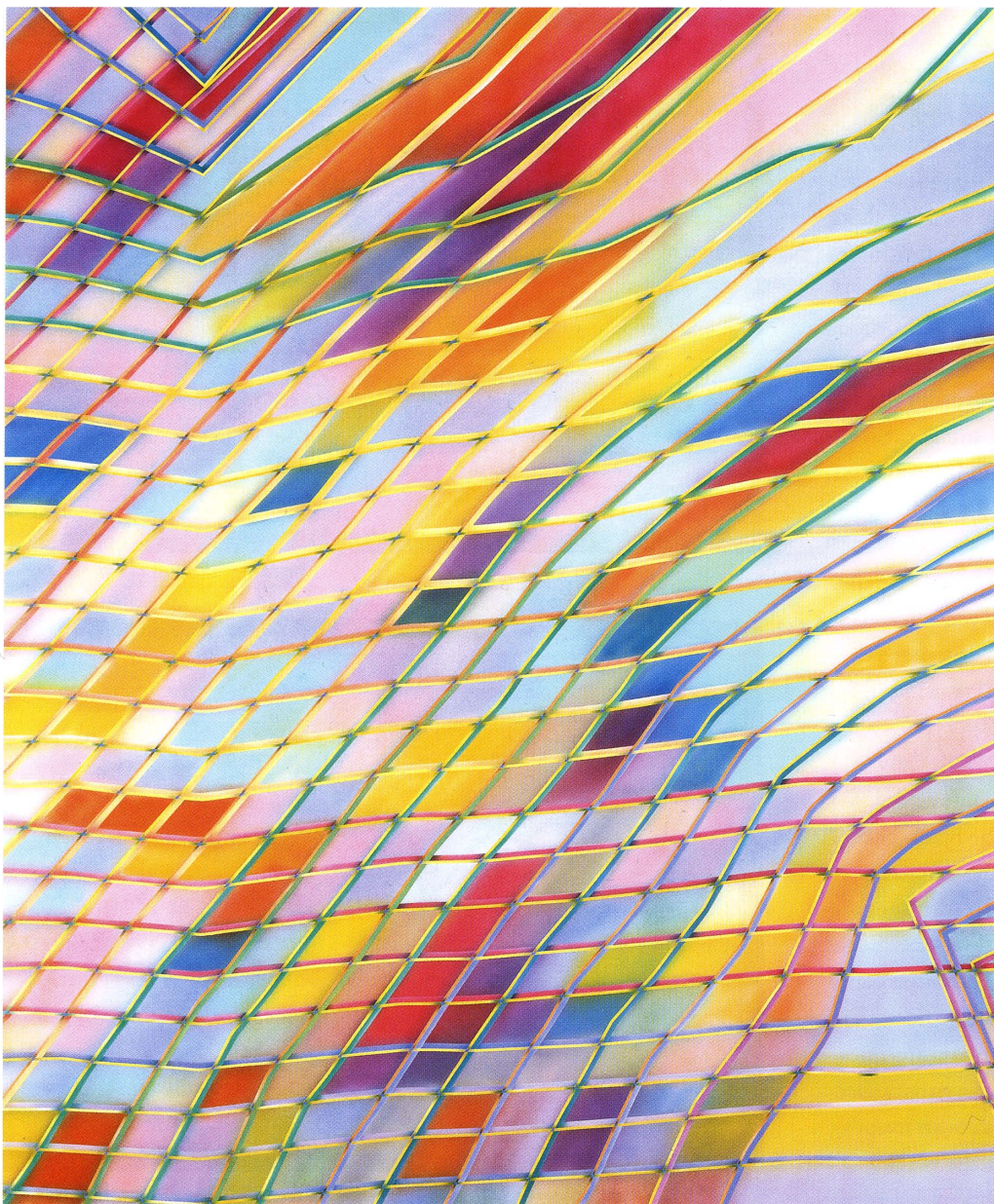


Figure 4. Kenneth Showell, *Besped*, 1967; sprayed acrylic on canvas, 108 x 90 in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1968.118

Bellamy took in recommending such young artists, it's remarkable how historically significant many of the works are and how wise his choices have proven to be over time.

#### ALTERNATE WORLDS

When I visited the Michener Collection in May 2001, most of the paintings in the storage area were hung closely together on a series of rolling racks. When we pulled a rack all the way out, the paintings suddenly became visible in all their complexity, vulnerability, and strength. I was especially moved when a painting by Ken Showell, *Besped* (1967, figure 4), emerged in this way. The painting seemed so brave, so fresh, so youthful, so filled with “flower power” optimism and desire. I knew Ken slightly and, looking at the painting, remembered the last time I had seen him in Soho lugging heavy boxes of photographic equipment down the street, shoulders hunched. I could not reconcile the weightless, effervescent painting in front of me with the man I had seen. Ken's success as a painter came early and did not last, so, to make a living, he photographed other people's art and tended the bar at Fanelli's, a Soho

hangout. I had seen other paintings by Ken but none like the one in the Blanton's collection. This painting seemed to transport me through a portal into a different, parallel future: into a new society that had achieved the goals of justice and equality that many of us believed in so strongly in the 1960s. This future was a vision from an ideal-filled time that now, because of Ken's painting, I remembered and longed to experience again.

#### EXPERIMENTAL ABSTRACT PAINTERS

Dissatisfied with the limitations of established painting discourses (Abstract Expressionism, geometric painting, and Clement Greenberg and the Color Field School), painters of both the 1930s and 1940s generations were trying to do something new. Given their understanding that art was under pressure from a number of historical shifts as well as changing social conditions, they wanted to find alternative possibilities within painting. Of course, in 1968 nobody could predict the power of the forces that would soon hit in the 1970s: the historical and aesthetic arguments declaring the end of painting, the anger and

despair over the continuation of the war in Vietnam, the disillusionment of Watergate, and the strife and cultural differences that would divide the country. These paintings were made before all that happened, from a perspective of historical optimism and under the influence of strong and growing civil rights and feminist movements that made social change seem possible.

These are works by brush painters who had come to New York, the center of the art world, to make places for themselves. They thought that they could fit into a native tradition of painting, a tradition that included the masters of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, and that they could contribute their own innovations. They came from art schools around the country (several from the Kansas City Art Institute) with great hopes and ambitions. By the late 1960s some of them had achieved sudden art world fame: major galleries represented them, and major museums, both in New York and around the world, showed their work. But this fame lasted longer for some than for others. The works in the Michener Collection that I am discussing are, therefore, a kind of snapshot of the time—an archive, a historical record that can be deciphered and added to. One can see from the vantage point of time that these paintings display a consistency and share overlapping concerns to a degree that is unusual even for artists working during the same period.

All twenty-three paintings (except the Richard Tuttle) that Michener purchased under the advice of Bellamy assume the large size of Abstract Expressionist canvases. Their size is an indicator of the optimistic energy of the time. And because they establish a direct, visceral relationship to the viewer's body, one is made aware of one's smaller size and physical form while standing in front of them. Moreover, the paintings show an understanding of Minimalist installation, which was designed to intensify viewers' physical awareness as they moved around the artwork: these paintings extend and connect to the space in which they are installed and create new kinds of interactions with viewers.

The paintings are all structured in simple, direct, and blunt ways, yet they also incorporate sophisticated vocabularies derived from the innovations of the Abstract Expressionists and the Minimalists, especially Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. For example, each painting is “non-compositional,” a phrase from the time used to describe a new way of structuring a painting, in which the parts have no hierarchy and relate primarily to the whole, thus focusing attention on the work in its entirety. “Allover” is another contemporaneous phrase that describes this approach to painting. The pictorial problem for these artists was how to work in adherence with this structure, while at the same time creating variety within the painting.

To my surprise, I noticed that many of the paintings have a square format (the Dan Christensens, Mary Corse, David Diao, Jane Logemann, and William Pettet; the John Torreano is circular but has a grid of squares within it). The Ralph Humphrey and Martin Canin are double squares. The frequent use of the square and the grid in these paintings relates to their “allover,” “non-compositional” structure.

In addition to their structural or compositional approach, these twenty-three paintings share a type of surface indebted to Pollock and

Newman. In an essay on Robert Mangold, art historian and critic Richard Shiff defined such surfaces as “declarative,” with “paint applied ‘very matter-of-factly.’” He stated, “Declarative painting is antithetical not only to the gestural drama of pictorial expressiveness, but also to the ‘topical’ and the ‘beautiful.’”<sup>4</sup> The surface is not expressionistic because the paint handling does not aim to convey direct gesture or emotion; but neither is it as cool and subtly refined as in geometric painting. Rather, the surfaces in these paintings are workmanlike—as accomplished and skillful as a carefully painted wall. These artists (Canin, Christensen, Diao, Torreano, Steve Conley, Alan Cote, Neil Williams) often used tape to make edges in the manner of house painters and experimented with industrial tools to apply paint, such as squeegees and spatulas (Conley, Diao, Lipsky, Marden) and spray guns (Conley, Corse, Humphrey, Showell, Lawrence Stafford). The emphasis on a “declarative surface” also reveals the process of making the painting. The surface is a record of the making—to be deciphered and reconstructed by the viewer, thus uncovering the hidden performance of the painter. This is painting on a stage—self-conscious and active.

Stafford's *Untitled* from 1968 (figure 5) is an especially clear example of an artist's engagement with “declarative surface.” Its surface is built up of many layers of sprayed acrylic paint, which was applied methodically with an airbrush as the artist walked back and forth in front of the canvas. In other paintings of this period, Stafford mechanized the painting process. He rolled the canvas around a large motorized horizontal cylinder that revolved at a constant rate. While this drum turned, he directed a spray of paint from an industrial spray gun at one spot along the turning drum, creating a blurry but straight line on the canvas. Next, the artist resumed spraying an inch or so to the side of the original location, which formed a second blurry but straight line, parallel to the first. He repeated this process across the length of the canvas. When Stafford removed the canvas from the drum and stretched it, he turned it so the lines became horizontal. The artist



Figure 5. Lawrence Stafford, *Untitled*, 1968; sprayed acrylic on canvas, 72 x 96 in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1968.121

then glazed transparent color over the surface with a brush or smaller spray gun, contrasting this final, more handmade finish with the mechanical look beneath.

#### COLOR: UNDERSHOOTING AND OVERSHOOTING

Color was an essential issue for all twenty-two painters recommended by Bellamy. They each avoided the three most familiar color strategies of their time: Constructivist color, which used systematic gradations of hue or value and often the three primary hues; classic Pop color (like Roy Lichtenstein's) with primary or easily identifiable hues used with graphic clarity; and Color Field painting, with its lush hues and limited range of values. The artists in the Michener Collection developed two basic alternative strategies. Some undershot color and devalued decoration by employing very light or very dark unnamable colors or strange metallic or industrial colors; others overshot the color—making it garish and kitsch—thus overstepping the “good taste” of decoration. In the latter case, hue becomes overly dominant and value is not controlled. Overshot colors often refer to those found in popular culture (interior decoration, clothes, cars, and toys) as well as other media (film, television, and posters), colors that are all around us and are made with artificial dyes.

Brice Marden's *Fave* (1968–1969, plate 111) is a classic example of the under-shooting strategy. Exactly what color is it? Green? Brown? Yellow? All these colors can be seen in the work in different lights and from different angles. Made by layering semitransparent paint mixed with a wax medium, the surface's color is very evocative because it is impossible to identify or remember. David Diao, in *Untitled* (1968,

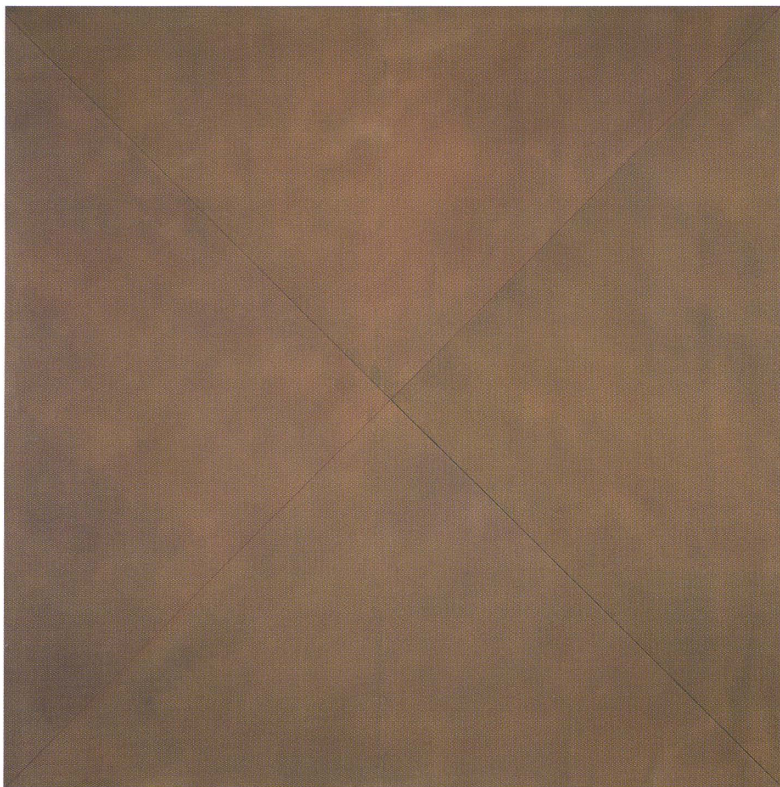


Figure 6. David Diao, *Untitled*, 1968; acrylic on canvas, 87 $\frac{3}{8}$  × 87 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1968.43

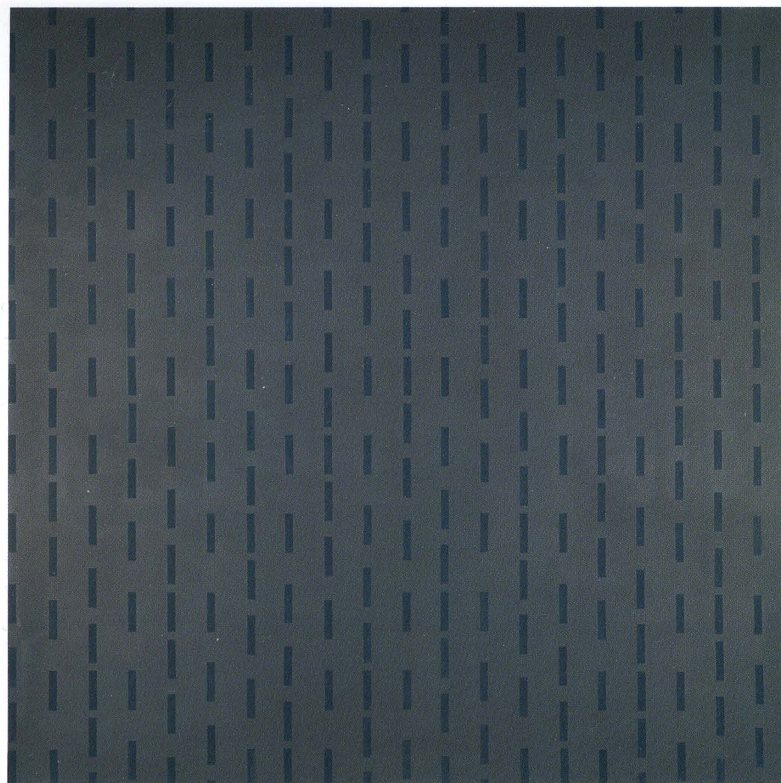


Figure 7. Dan Christensen, *Untitled*, September 1966; sprayed acrylic on canvas, 100 × 100 in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, G1972.10.1

figure 6), used a different technique to reach a similar effect: he applied multiple glazes of transparent acrylic over a metallic underlayer. Dan Christensen's two untitled paintings from 1966 (figure 7) change color in an even more exaggerated way when seen from the side because of his use of interference (the tiny reflecting glass microspheres commonly found on highway signs) and pearlescent pigments. From the front, the vertical dash forms are lighter in value than the background, but from the side, they are darker. Sometimes, when this shift in value takes place, it activates the whole surface, creating a wavelike motion. Jane Logemann's *Untitled* from 1969 also uses a dark color that is hard to identify specifically. Is the painting black or a very dark hue? Trying to resolve this ambiguity keeps the viewer focused on the work.

Other paintings rely on colors that are extremely light in value. Mary Corse is from Los Angeles but was working in New York in the late 1960s. She made her untitled painting from 1969 (plate 29) using white interference and pearlescent paint that changes in an astounding way into different rainbow hues when the work is viewed from the side. William Pettet also came to New York from California. His untitled painting from 1967 (not illustrated) looks just white at first but is in fact composed of layers of subtly varying grey over pink. In Richard Tuttle's *Light Pink Octagon* (1967, figure 8), a strange pale pink is soaked into unstretched canvas. The cloth is crumpled and the small folds create shadows, giving the color a permutable, grayed look.

To create *Untitled*, Stafford sprayed fuzzy black lines on a white ground and then glazed layers of magenta, blue, and yellow over them. This triad of colors relates to photographic print technology in ways that

now seem prescient given the subsequent and continuing engagement of many painters with the interface between photography and painting.

The paintings by Peter Young and Ken Showell, with their wonderful sense of Pop psychedelic color, are examples of the overshooting strategy. Young's *Capitalist Masterpiece #26* (1968, plate 200) has an overabundance of hue possibilities in the diverse multicolored dots that lend optical dazzle to the painting. Even the slight figurative reference seems to support this overabundance. Both John Torreano's *I* (1968, figure 9) and Neil Williams's *Ship's Complement* (1964, not illustrated) refer to Constructivist color only to break the rules of good taste. The Torreano has too many colors, some even pearlescent, and we all know it is "wrong" to take a grid to such extremes of pattern and variation. The sources of the impure and exaggerated colors of this painting, which would include stylish clothing and desirable decorative objects, are even clearer in Torreano's later jewel paintings. Williams used transparency and colors referring to interior decoration to complicate seemingly Constructivist relations between colors. In her work *Clear Music* (1969, not illustrated), Pat Lipsky stained the canvas like Greenberg's Color Field painters, but unlike them she created hues. She used the techniques of staining but created hues that are too strong, too insistent—especially the yellow—to work together as they conventionally should. The colors have an independence from each other that gives the painting vitality. In *H.C.E.* (1967, not illustrated) by Philip Wofford (an artist born in 1935, between the two generations), there is a kind of painterly organic form unusual among Bellamy's choices, but the strange pinks and greens are not the kinds of earth colors usually employed with such forms. *Imperio II* (1966, not illustrated) by

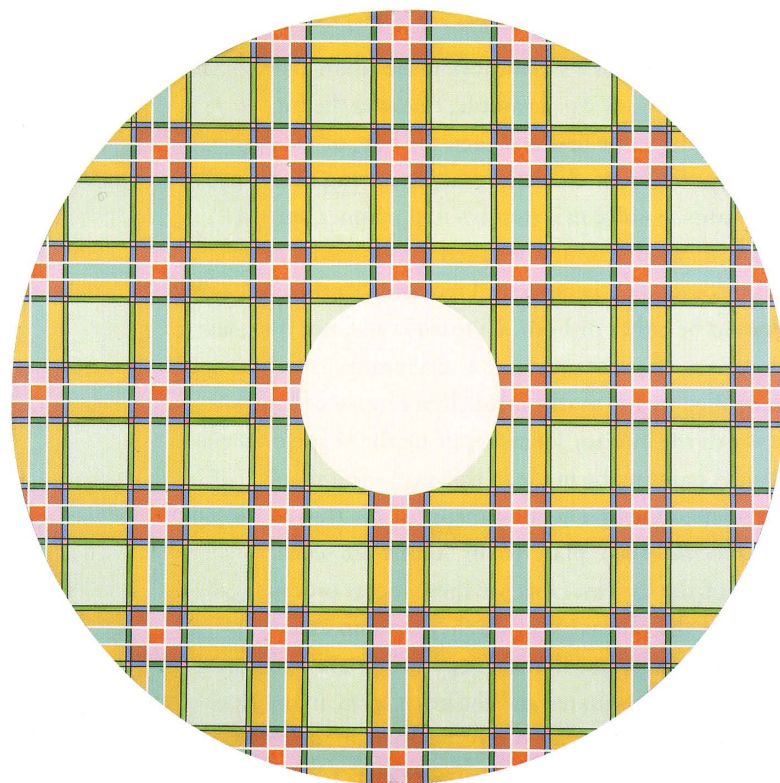


Figure 9. John Torreano, *I*, 1968; acrylic on canvas, 78 in. diameter; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1979.31

Steve Conley is perhaps the painting that hits the nadir with respect to taste. The sprayed pinks and mauves seem calculated to put one's teeth on edge, and the silver paint overlying thick textures is especially grotesque. These paintings try to push color into new territory by finding possibilities of structure and expression rarely explored in painting.

#### POST-MINIMAL PAINTING

Besides the shared subjects of structure and color, these paintings have other experiential issues in common. These are not paintings that can be seen quickly. To be appreciated, they need to be seen from various distances and angles over time. Many of the paintings feature fine detail as well as large areas of color. After moving in close and seeing the drips and underlayers on the bottom edge of Marden's *Fave*, for example, one can return to the monochromatic area above with an understanding of the tension between the thinness of the paint and the space implied by the color. And when one becomes aware of the variously layered undercolors in Pettet's painting, which at first glance seems to be a monochromatic white, the work springs to life. The triangles in Diao's *Untitled* tilt and move in a newly apparent shallow space once the viewer notices the reflective lines between them. The dots of paint in Young's *Capitalist Masterpiece #26* have a three-dimensional quality and reflect light off their shiny surfaces in a way that makes them seem to move as one walks by. All of these paintings engage the viewer by virtue of a tension between their simple, all-over structure and the complex perceptual experiences that accumulate during the extended period spent in the act of viewing them. This sense of duration changes how the paintings can be understood.

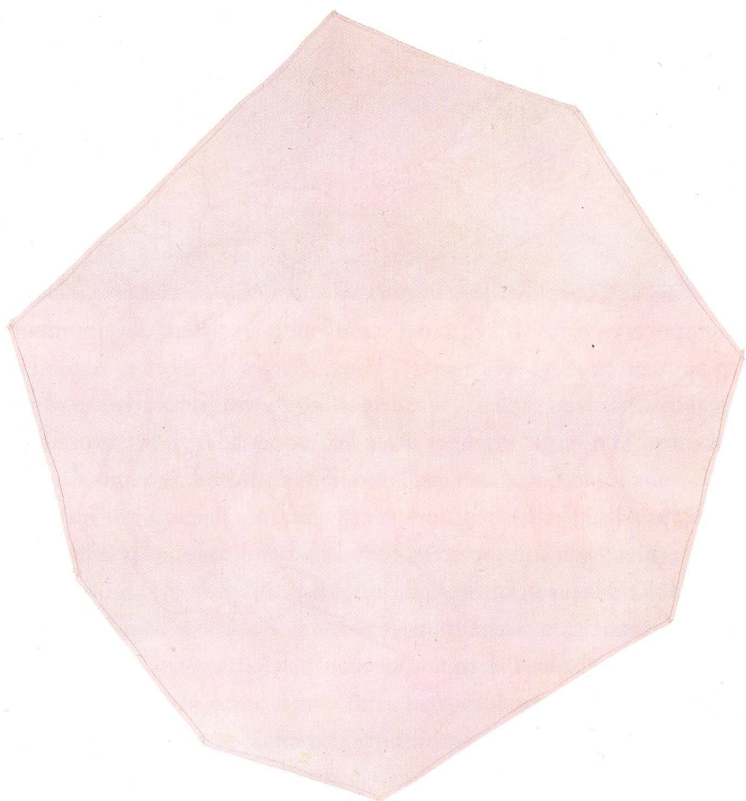


Figure 8. Richard Tuttle, *Light Pink Octagon*, 1967; canvas dyed with Tintex, 56 $\frac{3}{4}$  × 53 $\frac{1}{16}$  in.; Gift of Mari and James A. Michener, 1991.335



There is often a separation, rather than an integration, of elements in these paintings. For example, one sees the form first and then the color, or the value first and then the hue, or vice versa in each case. This separation of elements makes viewing the paintings a puzzle that one wants to solve in a step-by-step manner, but often there is no clear solution. Vision cannot be taken for granted. Is the diagonal in Lee Lozano's *Ream* a perspectival recession or the edge of a positive form? It could be either or both. *Untitled* (1968, not illustrated) by Elliot Lloyd is a shaped canvas but a very unusual one: the format seems controlled by the marks inside it, a reverse of Frank Stella's method, in which the interior forms replicate the shape of the stretcher. How could a painting be made in this way—the shaped canvas following the painted form? The movements of the thin rectangular forms in *Tocqueville* (1969, plate 30) by Alan Cote seem to ignore the diagonal edges of the canvas. How are these forms ordered in relation to the shape of the canvas? Why do they seem to extend past its edges?

It almost seems that these paintings are uncomfortable being paintings. The squares and the grids form an underlying structure, but that structure is thrown out of balance, made to move or shift. What at first seems to be a rational structure instead is twisted into something antirational, distorted. The honeycomb grid of Showell's *Besped* is a good example of this. Trying to figure out how this strange structure varies from a regular grid keeps the viewer engaged in the act of viewing, while the physical quality of the structure itself creates a sense of movement and lift. The grid in *Besped* is not used for clarity but rather to show how quickly vision, when questioned, can become unstable and irrational.

A part of the self-consciousness of these paintings is that their physicality is both accepted and denied. *Light Pink Octagon* by Tuttle is radically materialistic, just a piece of cloth fixed to the wall. But its physical nature also generates an ephemeral quality that is accentuated by the shadows from the crumpled cloth. In *Untitled* Corse creates a kind of perceptual cloud that hovers in front of the actual work. Is Stafford's *Untitled* a photograph or a painting? Is Humphrey's *Untitled* paint or light? These paintings simultaneously assert and deny their own presence as paintings.

Because they were approaching painting from a perspective of inquiry rather than orthodoxy, these artists used forms that often changed in sudden and unexpected ways from painting to painting. There is none of the slow, steady development dictated by the reductive paradigm of modernism. Young could make paintings with separate vocabularies of dots and lines in the same year. Christensen could move quickly from thin rectangular forms to sprayed lines, then to large blocky rectangles, and then to thick, overall painterly surfaces. Humphrey could alternate from vertical elements to swirls of intertwining linear patterns in the same year. Diao changed from geometric paintings like the one in the Blanton's collection to very painterly, process-oriented works and then back to more geometric shapes. The variety of forms found in these artists' paintings stems from an additive approach, and the problems raised by adding elements are very different from the classic issues of reduction. How to go in the other direction? How to add? This is a complete break from the way art evolved in modernism.

To make the Blanton's collection even more unique and reflective of these radical approaches, it would be wonderful if additional representative works by these same artists could be acquired: a three-dimensional Humphrey; a wraparound Baer; a thickly painted David Budd; a linear painting by Young, or one of his paintings stretched over branches; a romantic gestural painting by Pettet; a Showell sprayed crumple painting; a Diao process painting; and a later, more painterly Cote.

It is satisfying to report that recent acquisitions made by the museum have already deepened the holdings by several of the artists I have discussed: a small but excellent "jewel" painting by Torrealano (*Universe Painting*, 1975, plate 179); a later work by Williams (*Untitled*, n.d., not illustrated); an extraordinary and major late pierced painting, *Stroke* (1967–1970, plate 103), by Lozano; and a spray painting by Christensen (*LS*, November 1967, not illustrated) on long-term loan from Dick Bellamy's son, Miles Bellamy. There also have been recent gifts of works by artists whose efforts were related to the directions discussed above: a vibrant shaped painting by Edwin Ruda from 1966 (figure 9, page 384); a spare abstraction by Harriet Korman from 1972 (not illustrated); a lyrical white painting from 1967–1968 by Eleanore Mikus (plate 124); and two extremely beautiful optical paintings by Roy Colmer from the early 1970s (figure 10), which were made before he began to concentrate on photography and experimental film. I would love to see this extraordinary part of the Michener Collection further developed until it includes at least fifty works. Then it would be an indispensable, comprehensive, revelatory archive of this period of experimental abstraction—a time warp ready to be entered.

#### ILLUSION AND ILLUSIONISM

The differences between these painters and the preceding modernists, Abstract Expressionists, and Color Field painters were not adequately defined or appreciated at the time. Looking back now, after more than thirty years, I can see there was an astounding lack of insightful writing by contemporary critics and art writers, which only further confused and compromised the reception of the work.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the neglect experienced by these painters can be attributed to the fact that when their work was first shown and discussed, contemporary critics still equated steady and consistent development with authenticity and seriousness. Thus, writers were often extremely critical of what were, in fact, these paintings' most innovative attributes. The radical jumps and changes these artists made as they matured were timely and should have been understood and praised as a new way to open up possibilities for painting. Unfortunately, because the influence of Modernism was still too strong on those who were most influential in the public reception of new painting, this different and more challenging approach was neither appreciated nor acknowledged.

More specifically, Greenberg's "high Modernist" theories about painting were still very dominant at the time, and a number of the younger writers followed his thinking and misapplied his principles to these paintings. This lack of insight was decisive because, unlike Greenbergian Modernists, the painters discussed here did not want to separate painting from the influences of other forms of art and popular culture but rather embraced these influences as a way to find

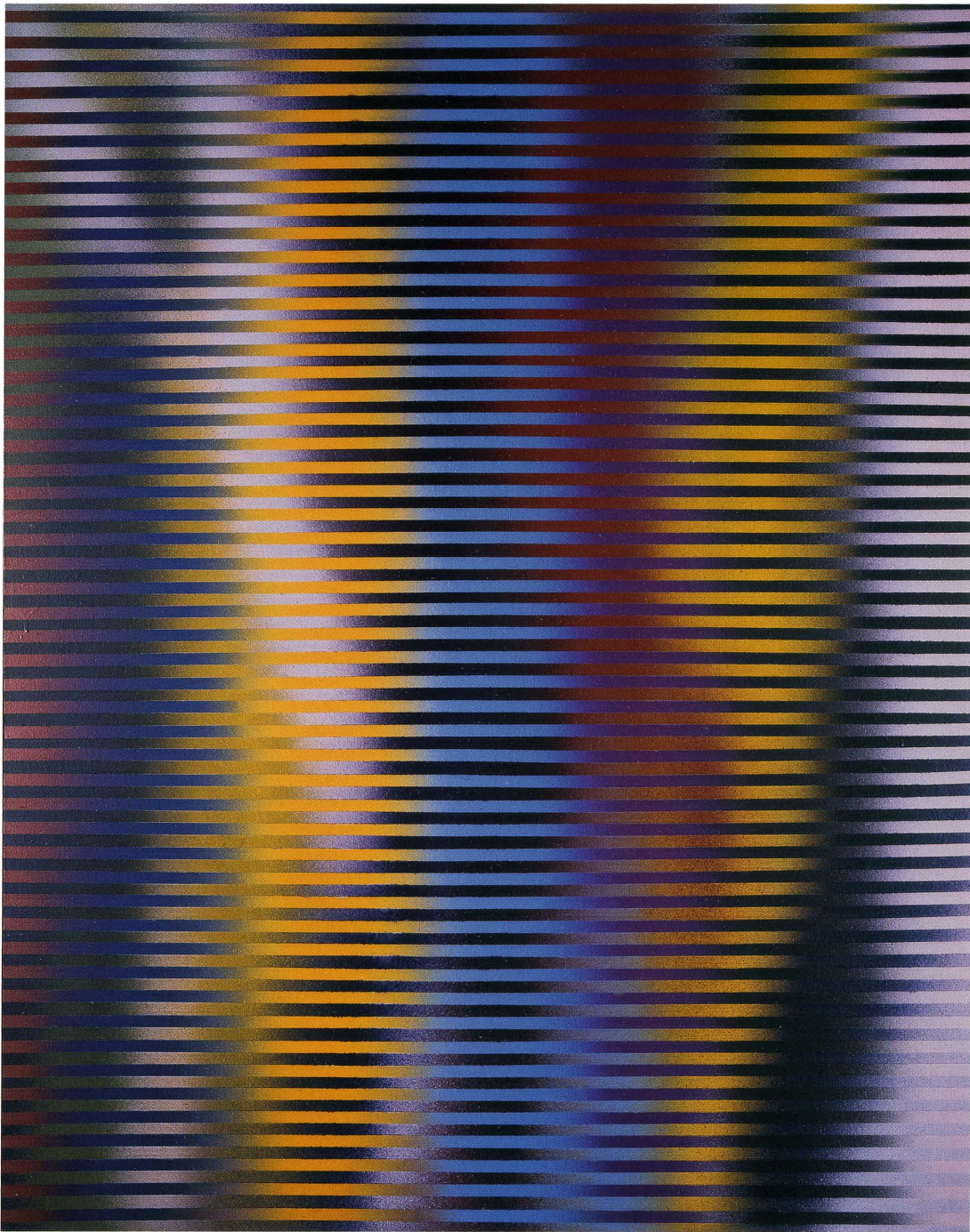


Figure 10. Roy Colmer, #56, 1974; acrylic on cotton duck, 75<sup>11/16</sup> x 59<sup>3/16</sup> in.; Gift of Claudia Colmer, 2002.2838

new avenues for abstraction. In defiance of the imperatives for flatness and other formal properties that Greenberg thought unique and essential to painting, these artists sought painting's future outside the discipline. They made paintings to be experienced not at once but over time, and not in isolation but in relation to the world.

In addition to the unrelenting domination of Greenbergian orthodoxy, there was also a great deal of anti-painting rhetoric at the time that supported other forms of art and accused painting of being reactionary because it was inherently illusionistic. In a recent essay on Donald Judd, Richard Shiff, following a distinction made by the artist, clarified the difference between “illusion” and “illusionism”: “illusion is a natural condition of vision, a physiological fact: illusionism is a constructed effect for the pictorially indoctrinated.” Shiff continued:

*Indeed, Judd did take pains, going so far as to point out that, among all the subjective psychological experiences people have, optical illusions (such as chromatic afterimages) are ‘absolutely objective.’ Everyone sees optical illusions in the same places, at the same times. Such illusions are not only objective but real—real illusions. They have little to do with illusionism. . . . Illusion is the way things are. Illusionism is the way things aren’t.<sup>6</sup>*

In retrospect, we can now differentiate between “illusion” and “illusionism” in painting, whereas, at the time, “illusion” and “illusionism” were both attacked as if they were the same. Painting as a medium doesn’t necessarily involve illusionism, as its critics insisted. Instead, painters can strategically employ illusion as part of the structures

they invent. The painters that Bellamy recommended for the Michener Collection used illusion in their works, but not illusionism. The time-based, self-conscious structures of their paintings demonstrate their questioning of the possibilities of painting. They used separation and ambiguity to create illusions of form or color, but these illusions are not part of a system of illusionism, an acceptance of the conventions of painting. On the contrary, to understand these paintings, a viewer must question the illusions and discover them to have a physical and perceptual basis.

The only writing from the time, that I can find, in which a critic made a distinction between “illusion” and “illusionism” is an essay by Lucy Lippard titled “Perverse Perspectives.” Published in *Art International* in 1967, this essay analyzed different kinds of illusionism and illusion in geometric painting and argued for what Lippard called the “new illusionism.” (Following Shiff, it would be called “illusion.”) Lippard wrote:

*Within the last year or so, a new incongruous illusionism has appeared, incorporating the statement of the flat surface of a painting and the counterstatement of an inverse perspective that juts out into the spectator’s space. Such “perverse perspectives” are founded on disunity, on a complex, tightly structured denial of pictorial logic that has its cake and eats it too, in the sense that it never wholly abandons the assertion of the picture plane arrived at by modernist or rejective painting, but distorts and reconstructs that plane outside of the conventions of depth simulation.<sup>7</sup>*

In the essay she advanced an opinion very similar to Shiff’s:

*Trompe l’oeil in the traditional sense merely presents the illusion as reality and depends upon the interest aroused by deception alone. The new perverse styles are both more direct and more devious. They make no claim to simulation of reality—concrete or figurative. The trickery is left unconsummated and exposed, but continuous. No actual three-dimensional substance is ever described, and illusion is established only to be discarded in favor of the painting as painting.<sup>8</sup>*

Just months after Lippard attempted to foster an appreciation for recent abstract painting with her explanation of “new illusionism,” Baer defiantly and passionately defended it in a letter to the editor in the September 1967 issue of *Artforum*. Baer argued that, contrary to the allegations of Robert Morris and Judd, a painting is not necessarily inherently illusionistic, spacial, allusive, or generative of figure/ground contrast: painting does not equal “pictures in the . . . everyday sense of the word.”<sup>9</sup> She contended that in their arguments against painting Morris and Judd were confusing illusion and allusion. She argued for a more complex reconsideration of the terms used to evaluate painting. After a point-by-point refutation of their positions, Baer ended by turning their language against them: “An ‘inescapable’ delusion moves the above critics. It is objectionable.”<sup>10</sup>

Lippard’s essay and Baer’s letter represent the beginning of an argument that seeks to define new criteria for looking at paintings. But



Figure 11. Robert Smithson, *Hotel Palenque* [detail], 1969; thirty-one chromogenic-developed slides and audio CD, dimensions variable; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Purchased with funds contributed by the International Director’s Council and Executive Committee Members, 1999; Art © Estate of Robert Smithson/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

despite their efforts, critics rarely applied the distinctions that they insisted were necessary, and the dialogue never got underway. No debate about what kind of illusion was possible in painting was forthcoming. Instead, experimental painting was caught in the middle—condemned as outdated by unsympathetic critics and misunderstood by supporters, who, though well-meaning, used outmoded definitions of the medium and old-fashioned, no longer relevant for their judgements.

#### PORTALS AND DOORWAYS

While for a moment in the late 1960s it seemed that new possibilities were opening up in both art and society, this hopeful time soon ended. By the early 1970s most of the successes I cited had disappeared for these artists. From the older generation: Williams died young; Lozano dropped out of the art scene; Baer left for Amsterdam; and Humphrey did not achieve the recognition many expected. Of the younger artists, only Marden had a significant career. Tuttle was viciously attacked after his Whitney retrospective in 1975, but he continued to have a career because of support in Europe. Young, Stafford, Cote, and Wofford left New York. Others stayed but just held on, living in a distressed, divided, and decaying city.

Born in 1946, I am from a slightly younger generation. When I returned to New York in 1971, these were the artists just ahead of me. I saw their shows, discussed their work with my friends, and watched them carefully. I took their misfortunes as a warning. Looking back, I can certainly see how they were hurt by a lack of support, which had the effect of limiting their opportunities for exhibiting and for

engaging in professional, intellectual dialogue. Often their greatest advocates were in Europe, but when support at home ended, they could no longer travel or maintain the credibility to sustain a career that only existed abroad.

And there is another factor that I have become aware of during this research. I have emphasized the year 1968 in the title because it seems to me that it sits at the tipping point of a drastic shift of mood in relation to art. By 1969, after assassinations and race riots and the escalation of the Vietnam War, youthful exuberance no longer seemed appropriate to these artists. Lozano's work accommodates this shift. The darkening and now somber light in Christensen's and Humphrey's work also acknowledges this change—but other artists seemed unable to alter their work to fit this adjustment of mood.

### ROBERT SMITHSON'S QUESTION

In 1972 Robert Smithson spoke at the University of Utah and gave what might be the greatest artist's talk of all time, "Hotel Palenque." To the surprise and bewilderment of his audience, he didn't show slides of and talk about the Mayan ruins in Palenque, Mexico, as one might have expected from the title of his talk. Instead, he described in detail the architecture of the tourist hotel, itself in ruins, where he stayed. In this indirect and humorous way, he conveyed his innovative ideas about art.

Toward the beginning of the talk, one of Smithson's slides showed the floor of a partially enclosed walkway, a kind of veranda around a courtyard, which was articulated with receding bands of black and red tiles (figure 11). In an offhand manner, he said, "Actually I feel that these tiles are much more interesting than most of the paintings being done in New York City right now, showing far more imagination."<sup>11</sup> This comment is typical of much of the anti-painting rhetoric in the late 1960s and 1970s, and is characteristic of Smithson's attitudes as well. But why did this particular view of the hotel make Smithson think of New York painting? And why did he feel compelled to be so critical of that painting when looking at this slide? The receding bands of tiles, the grid of lines between them, and the diagonal repetition of organic rock shapes inside them echo then-current New York painting by providing an illusion without illusionism.

Just before his swipe at painting, Smithson said that he liked to think of the tile floor "as a black and white perspective" that seems to "lead towards something," but there is no point in figuring out where.<sup>12</sup> This issue of decentering, of throwing a grid off balance and making it move, is exactly the issue that was then most important to New York painting. How could a grid be made uneasy and troubled? Smithson experienced how the grid and the space around him changed as he walked down this veranda in the hotel. This is what the painters who Bellamy recommended also wanted a viewer to experience. They made paintings that could not be seen in a glance, that needed to be experienced over time, like Smithson's walk. This slide reminded Smithson that painting could have goals in common with his own. In a territorial maneuver, he attacked the competing influence of painting.

The image on the very last slide of Smithson's talk is of a door. Smithson observed, in his matter of fact way, "This is sort of the door . . . I mean it's just a green door."<sup>13</sup> It is a strange statement.

What does he mean? He means that Palenque's forest, outdoors, is green. One can see light coming in from under the door. He is reminding us that the door can open. It leads outdoors. To me, this implies that the door is like a painting—it can lead to other spaces. Smithson concluded his talk with a brief, very poetic summary. He said: "The door probably opens to nowhere and closes on nowhere."<sup>14</sup> Sounds like a painting to me.

### NOTES

1. There are several artists whose work Michener bought on Bellamy's advice that I have not written about in this essay because their work is figurative or because they were born earlier than the generations on which I have chosen to focus. They are Milet Andrejevic, Robert Beauchamp, Leon Berkowitz, Norman Carton, Miles Forst, Jules Olitski, John Martin Tweddle, John Wesley, and Tom Wesselmann.
2. Rolf Ricke, conversation with the author, Cologne, Germany.
3. See Reed's interviews in the Blanton Museum of Art Archives, The University of Texas at Austin. He spoke with Dan Christensen, David Diaio, Pat Lipsky, Lawrence Stafford, John Torreano, and Peter Young (not recorded).
4. Richard Shiff, "Autonomy, Actuality, Mangold," in *Robert Mangold* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 21.
5. There are a few essays that are helpful. Carter Ratcliff wrote about new attitudes toward light in "New Informalists: Young New York Painters," *Artnews* 68 (February 1970): 47. Bill Wilson wrote on Humphrey's work: see his "Ralph Humphrey: An Apology for Painting," *Artforum* 16 (November 1977): 54–59, and "Ralph Humphrey," *Arts Magazine* 50 (February 1976): 5. And E. Johnson wrote a good essay on Peter Young: "Peter Young: A Chronology of the Work," *Artforum* 9 (April 1971): 58–63.
6. Richard Shiff, *Donald Judd: Late Work* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2000), 9.
7. Lucy Lippard, "Perverse Perspectives," *Art International* 11 (March 1967), reprinted in Lucy R. Lippard, *Changing: Essays on Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1971), 168–69.
8. Lippard, *Changing: Essays on Art*, 171.
9. Jo Baer, "Letter to the Editor," *Artforum* 6 (September 1967): 6.
10. Baer, 6.
11. Robert Smithson, "Insert Robert Smithson: Hotel Palenque, 1969–72," *Parkett* no. 43 (1995): 121.
12. Smithson, 121.
13. Smithson, 132.
14. Smithson, 132.