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YOUNG AT ART



ca. 1950: Diebenkorn at work

**THE EARLY WORKS OF ARTISTS CAN
REVEAL KEY MOMENTS IN THEIR PROGRESSION
TOWARD A SIGNATURE STYLE,
AND THE APPEAL IS NO LONGER JUST ACADEMIC—
PRICES ARE MOVING UP AS COLLECTORS
SEEK NEW AREAS TO MINE.**

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS

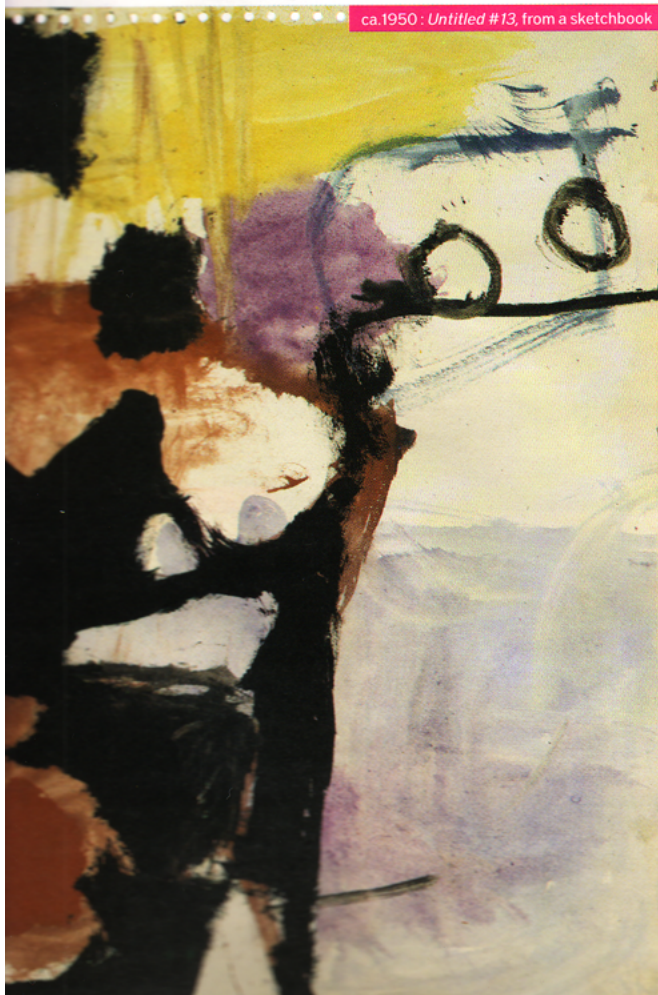


1949: *Untitled*

THERE'S OFTEN A POINT in a retrospective of a major artist where the first student-type pieces start to yield to that more singular voice that defines his or her style. In the Richard Serra show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York last year, that moment came with *One Ton Prop: House of Cards*, a sculpture made in 1969, when Serra was 30 years old, composed of four lead plates balanced against one another. Early works such as this aren't always fully there yet, but they can provide tantalizing hints of what's to come and reveal crucial links in an artist's evolution. Such transitional pieces beguile scholars and museumgoers alike, but are they an area of interest, or opportunity, for collectors?

"It's almost like Google Earth with certain artists, where you can see the progression and can pan in to what's going to happen," says Anthony Grant, Sotheby's senior international specialist for contemporary art, pointing to the American abstract artists Richard Diebenkorn and Mark Rothko, who have active markets for their earlier paintings as well as for their better-known later

RICHARD DIEBENKORN REALIZED IN ALBUQUERQUE



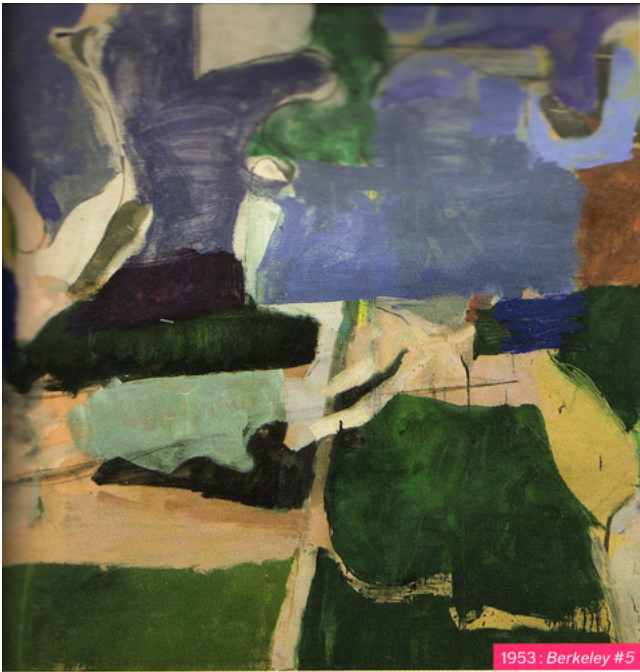
ca.1950: *Untitled #13, from a sketchbook*

ones. "Nowadays, because so many classic examples have gotten so expensive and hard to find, earlier examples by artists who have always been collected are really moving up in price."

A rarely seen group of works that Diebenkorn painted from 1950 to 1952, while he was a graduate student in his late 20s at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, and that he himself believed represented a breakthrough have been pulled together in a show organized by the Harwood Museum of Art, in Taos, that travels to the Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C., next month.



1952: *Albuquerque 9*



1953: Berkeley #5



1982: Diebenkorn at a desk

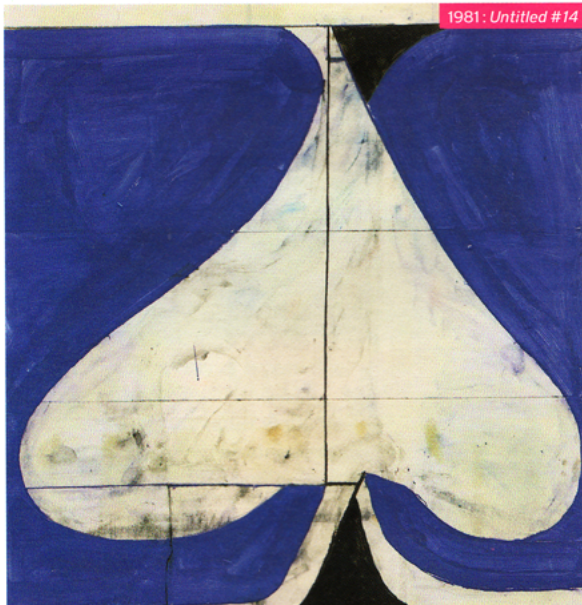
THAT HE'D BEEN AVOIDING REFERENCES TO LANDSCAPE.

Charles Lovell, co-curator of the exhibition, says that the key shift for Diebenkorn—presaging his brilliant “Ocean Park” series, begun in 1967 in Santa Monica—was rooted in his recognition that he had been avoiding any reference to landscape in his earlier Abstract Expressionist works of the late 1940s. “The landscape in New Mexico is so profound, and he was able to see that it caused him to make certain kinds of marks or a horizon line,” says Lovell, who notes the particular influence of the aerial views of the desert Diebenkorn saw when first flying between California and New Mexico. “He didn’t fight it but used it.”

While the earthen tones of these works don’t say “Diebenkorn” the way the vibrant blues, greens and oranges in his subsequent “Berkeley” and later “Ocean Park” series do, Dorsey Waxter, director of Greenberg Van Doren in New York, which represents the artist’s estate, sees continuity in how Diebenkorn’s sense of place impacts his palette. In 2000, the gallery mounted a well-received show of the artist’s abstractions from 1949 to 1955, with the Albuquerque canvases priced at \$300,000



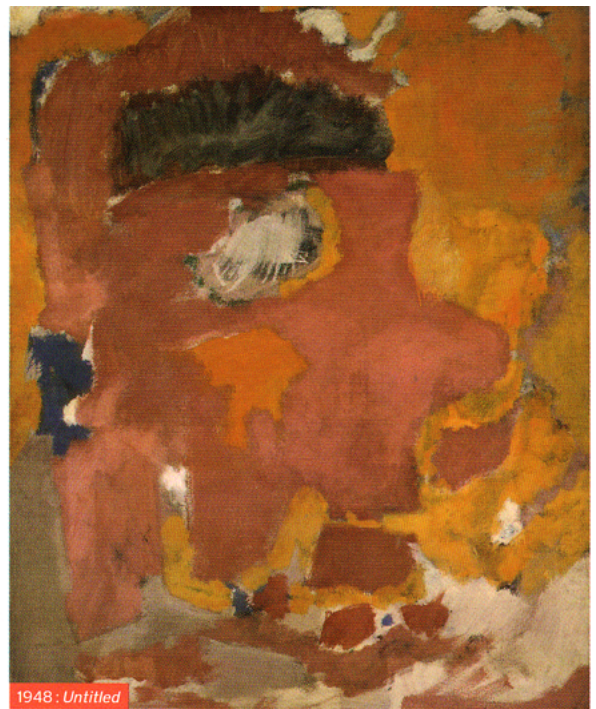
1968: Ocean Park 14 1/2



1981: Untitled #14



1946 : Sea Fantasy



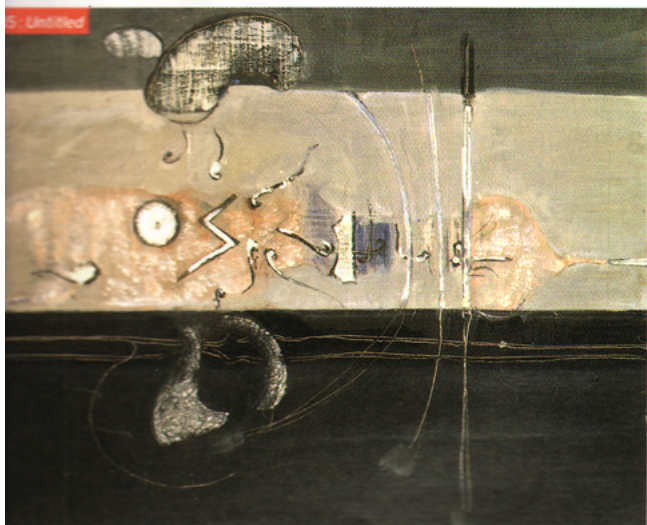
1948 : Untitled

and up. “More-seasoned collectors made purchases because people who own his work collect it in depth,” says Waxter, who estimates that those works would sell more in the range of \$1.5 million in today’s market—compared with the \$6.8 million achieved by a “Berkeley” painting at Christie’s in May 2007 and the \$8 million asked for an “Ocean Park” in a recent private offering.

“If I had that show now in this market,” Waxter continues, “I think there would be people who might appear on the scene who were new to collecting. His early works are definitely an opportunity. The later pieces are more and more expensive, there are fewer and fewer of them, and that drives people to look at other areas of the artist’s work.” Grant notes, however, that some of Diebenkorn’s early works are in poor condition. “Sometimes ‘early’ means the artist hasn’t really gotten the whole media down correctly yet,” he says. “A lot of the Albuquerque are paint over paint that was not yet dry, so there’s a cracking issue.”

It’s one thing if the artist himself felt certain works were a breakthrough. But what about early pieces that predate the artist’s

DURING THE '40S, **MARK ROTHKO'S** BIOMORPHIC FIGURES



1948 : Untitled



1948 : Untitled

own sense of a turning point? Richard Prince, for instance, considers his pivotal year to be 1977, when, at the age of 28, he started rephotographing advertisements rather than clipping and collaging them. "He framed and matted it so it was a completely seamless work of art and not something obviously manipulated or plucked from journalistic sources," says Guggenheim Museum chief curator Nancy Spector, who opened the recent Prince retrospective there with his first appropriated photographs, of four similarly composed living rooms. For a small concurrent show in the Guggenheim's education center, Spector carefully selected works from Prince's own collection that he'd done in 1975 and 1976 and showed connections with later series. For instance, black-and-white photos he shot of trees in New Hampshire, accompanied by humorous typewritten captions, exploit the relationship between image and text. "Clearly he's rehearsing ideas of fact and fiction, the known and the represented, that will show up later,"



1964: Rothko reflects



1949: No. 8 (Multiform)

EVOLVED INTO NONREFERENTIAL BLOBS OF COLOR.

says Spector. "It's fascinating material, but you can't tell what kind of artist he's going to be by these early works."

Although Prince cooperated with Spector, he refused to participate with an exhibition last year at the Neuberger Museum, in Purchase, New York, called "Fugitive Artist: The Early Work of Richard Prince, 1974-77." The pictures shown were pulled from private collections, and Prince would not give permission to reprint them in the show's accompanying catalogue (the exhibition curator, Michael Lobel, published the catalogue with empty white boxes where the images should have been). Prince gave the show a hostile review last summer in *Art+Auction's* sister publication *Modern Painters*, calling the pictures on view "student work" and "extended adolescence." Matthew Barney, in contrast, deliberately revisited the drawings he did as a student at Yale, displaying them in vitrines as part of his 2005 installation *Drawing Restraint 9* at San Francisco MoMA.

"All artists have earlier work, regardless of what they choose to do with it or what art historians choose to do with it," says Spector, noting that the Metropolitan Museum had acquired an



1952: No. 15



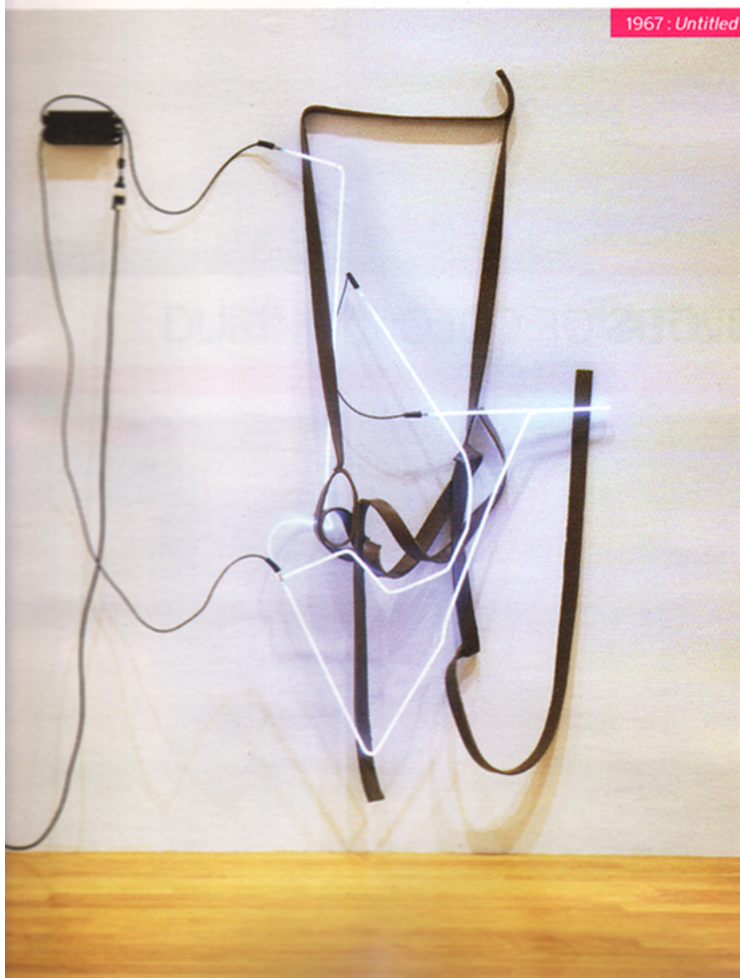
1966-67: Belts

early collage work as part of a larger package of Prince photographs but that this material is generally not on the market. “The Neuberger show really brought into focus some of these issues, which are ethical in a way—whether you respect an artist’s wishes about the drawings under the bed. How relevant are they?”

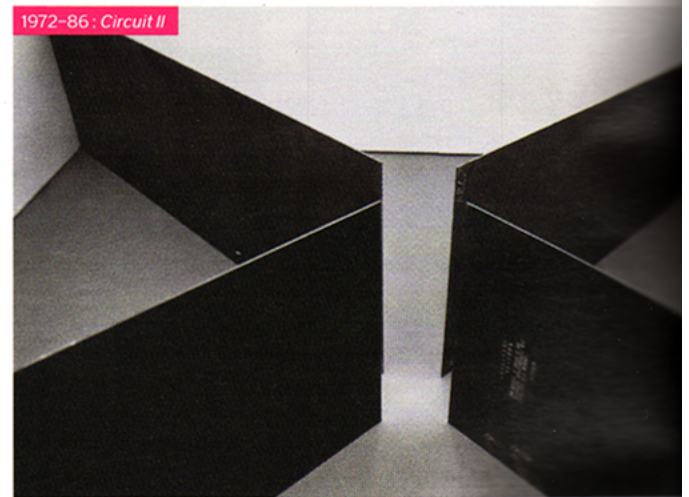
Bonnie Clearwater, the former curator of the Rothko Foundation and now the director of MoCA North Miami, devotes a huge chunk of her 2006 publication, *The Rothko Book*, to the three decades it took the artist to evolve from figuration to the diaphanous bands of color that were his signature style from 1950 on. She finds the period starting in 1940, when Rothko was 37, to be extremely rich; this is when, in his quest for a greater sense of universality, the artist began to fuse multiple mythological figures into a single bundle that filled most of the picture plane. As the decade progressed, he abstracted his forms further, making more biomorphic figures and, in the late 1940s, his so-called multiforms, involving completely nonreferential blobs of color. “Symmetry and stacking were the compositional leap he then needed to take to reach his goal of unifying these isolated fragments in a momentary stasis,” says Clearwater.

The idea that the conglomerations of figures in Rothko’s mythic paintings are somehow embedded in the nebulous forms

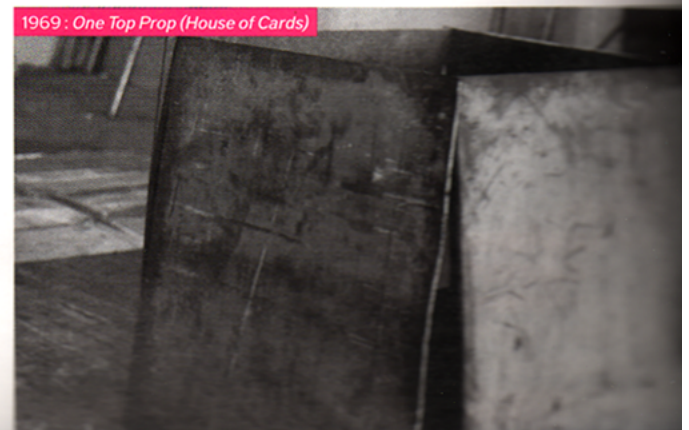
RICHARD SERRA CONSIDERS *ONE TON PROP* A CREATIVE



1967: Untitled



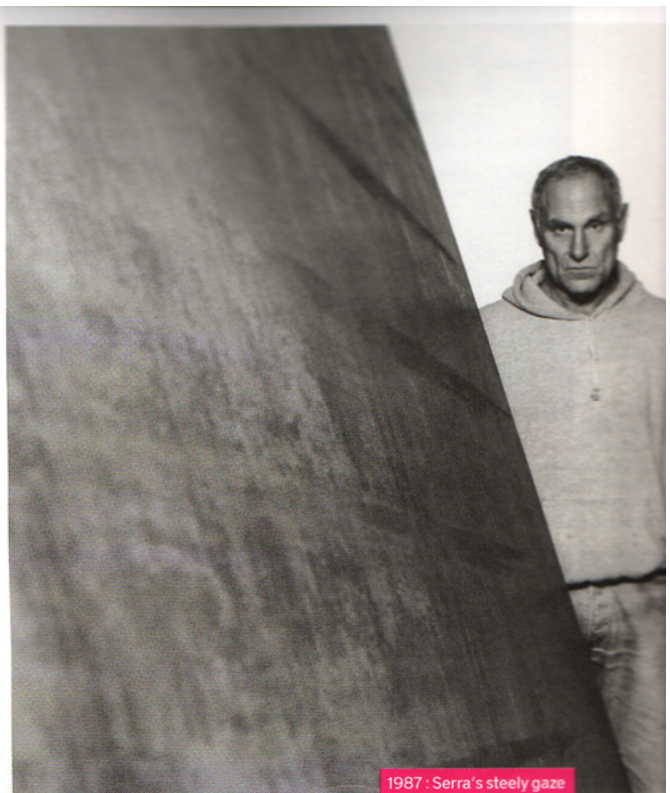
1972-86: Circuit II



1969: One Top Prop (House of Cards)



1987 : Even Level



1987 : Serra's steely gaze

LEAP BECAUSE "NOTHING EXTRANEIOUS WAS NECESSARY."

hovering in his classic pictures is eye-opening, but Rothko refused to have the former pieces included in his 1961 retrospective at New York's MoMA. "He thought people would jump to the conclusion that all he did was take the figure away and leave the bands behind, whereas he still saw himself as putting objects on a surface," says Clearwater, who notes that Rothko nonetheless kept all these works. When she had to decide what to do with the foundation's vast collection of his pictures after his death, in 1970, she felt strongly that the bulk of the early works should stay together for the benefit of scholarship. The foundation gave some 300 paintings and works on paper, in addition to hundreds of drawings, to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C.

With Rothko's mature paintings commanding \$35 million and up, some collectors are moving down the pecking order. "People used to look at early Rothkos and shrug their shoulders, and now suddenly you can see his multiforms selling for millions of dollars," says Amy Cappellazzo, the international cohead of postwar and contemporary art at Christie's. A 1948 multiform, for instance, sold at Christie's in November 2006 for \$1.7 million. Still, Cappellazzo would not recommend early works in general as a collecting area. "If you can't buy a signature Rothko, I'd say find another artist where you can still get a major example. Early works of artists before they hit their stride usually are interesting to people who are already collectors of that artist's work, and generally these examples would have more limited appreciation."

Both Cappellazzo and Grant agree, for instance, that Lucian Freud's paintings from the 1940s and '50s appeal primarily to people who collect his work in depth. "For what you have to pay for early work in this market, I'm not sure it's going to be someone's stand-alone Freud," says Grant. In 2005, Sotheby's sold the 1943 canvas *Man with a Feather*, painted before Freud turned 21, for \$6.76 million. While that may look like a bargain compared



2007 : Recent works at MoMA, New York

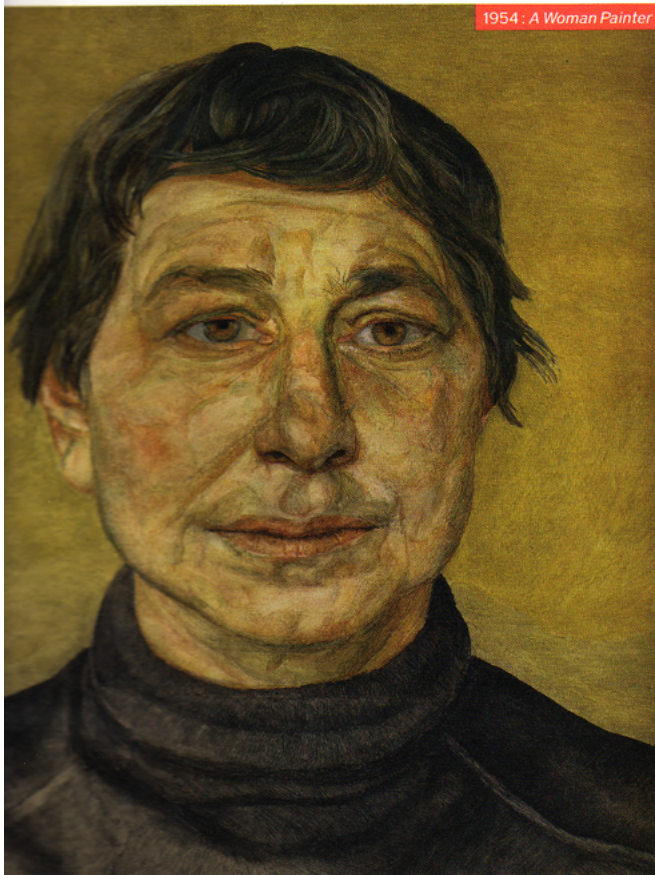


ca. 1958 : Freud in focus

with his later signature nudes, which might sell for \$15 million to \$20 million, it's still a hefty sum.

In the case of Richard Serra, Grant sees the attraction of the artist's earlier work as both aesthetic and practical. "Serra has been making monumental sculpture that requires engaging him in a contract, so it's not going to get traded in the same way as a David Smith," he says, noting the secondary-market success of the sculptor's 1987 slanted-T piece *Even Level*, which sold last November at Sotheby's for \$1.5 million, breaking his previous auction record. "This was a domestically scaled sculpture, which is highly desirable." Serra's even earlier experimental works in rubber, neon and lead, from the late 1960s, when he was in his late 20s, had a lot of visibility in his 2007 retrospective at MoMA. *Three Lead Coils*, a 1968 piece in which Serra cut the lead, let it curl naturally and hung it as a sculpture, sold at Sotheby's in May 2000 for \$247,750. "If that same piece came up now, I think there would be a lot of interest among collectors," says Grant, who also anticipates increased collector scrutiny of cityscapes produced by Joan Mitchell (1925-92) from 1945 to 1949, predating her peak years of 1955 to 1961.

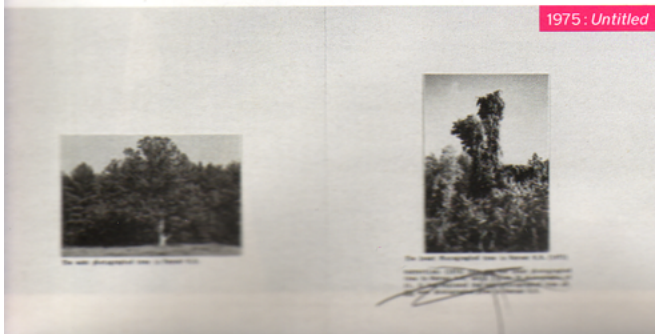
For many institutions, early pieces by now-established artists arrived in their collections fresh from the studio. "During the minutes of a meeting in 1955, the joke was made that the Albright-Knox Art Gallery is only interested in bringing in new



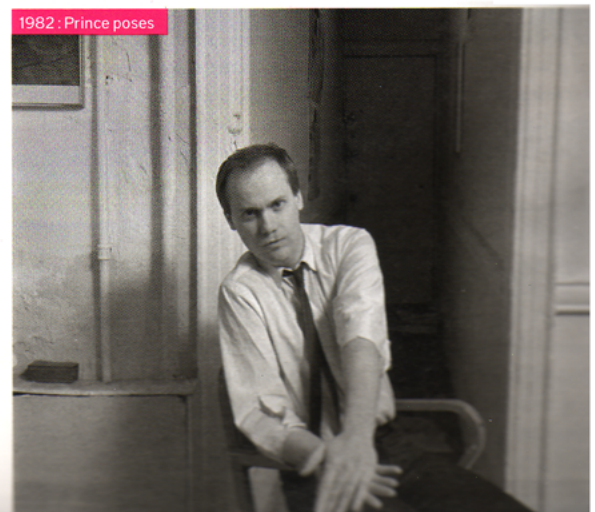
1954 : A Woman Painter



2006-07: Ria, Naked Portrait



1975 : Untitled



1982 : Prince poses



1953 : David Smith, *Tank Totem IV*

1963 : *Cubi X*

work that's dripping wet," says Louis Grachos, director of the Buffalo, New York, institution, which acquired many breakthrough examples in this manner. These include *Painting with Red Letter S*, 1957, by a 32-year-old Robert Rauschenberg, which foreshadows the creeping of words into his painting, and *Tank Totem IV*, 1953, by David Smith (1906–65), which still references the figure but displays a move toward the more abstract use of space realized in his "Cubi" series, from 1961–65.

Grachos notes that when the Albright-Knox acquired key early works by Willem de Kooning, Jasper Johns, Ed Ruscha, Frank Stella and Andy Warhol, the general art-loving public may not have perceived them as important but the museum certainly considered them seminal. "We've had a great legacy of curators and directors who have been able to identify shifts in the art world and strategically brought in what I think are turning-point pieces," says Grachos, who believes that such recent acquisitions as Leo Villareal's 2005 *Light Matrix* and Gillian Wearing's 2004 photo series "Album" may prove over time to be transitional works for these 40-something artists.

"Obviously it's easier and safer to gravitate only to the signature works of an artist," he continues. "But I always admire the courage of both curators and private collectors who are really looking at those early stages of an artist's evolution. It shows sophistication in how you understand art." ▣

THE EVOLUTION OF STYLE—AND PRICES

When it comes to valuing an artwork, the artist's age at the time it was created plays no small part.

MARK ROTHKO

In 1950, Rothko symmetrically stacked his diaphanous bands of color, which was the final step to his artistic maturity. But his "multiform" canvases, from the late 1940s, display many qualities of his classic paintings and are a fraction of the price.



EARLY:
Untitled, 1948. Sold for \$1.7 million at Christie's New York in November 2006.



LATE:
Untitled (Red, Blue, Orange), 1955. Sold for \$34.2 million at Christie's New York in November 2007.

PABLO PICASSO

Picasso's development from an artistically precocious teenager who, at 16, produced the self-portrait below, to a radical innovator happened early and forked in multiple directions. He painted his groundbreaking *Les Femmes d'Alger* just 10 years later but continued to reinvent his art over his prolific 91 years.



EARLY:
Autoportrait, Barcelone, ca. 1897. Sold for €814,000 (\$1.1 million) at Digard, in Paris, in June 2007.



LATE:
Dora Maar au chat, 1941. Sold for \$95.2 million at Sotheby's New York in May 2006.

PAUL CÉZANNE

The dark, phantasmagoric imagery of Cézanne's early work from the late 1860s, tinged with sex and violence, gave way to light, color and looser brushwork in the 1870s, after his association with the Impressionists, particularly Camille Pissarro.



EARLY:
L'amour en plâtre, ca. 1867. Sold for \$289,000 at Christie's New York in November 2007.



LATE:
Comptoir et assiette de biscuits, ca. 1877. Sold for \$12.6 million at Christie's New York in November 2007.

EDGAR DEGAS

Even the portrait below by a 21-year-old Degas, when his ambition was to be a history painter, has the unfinished, extemporaneous quality that characterizes his later off-kilter compositions of dancers and other scenes of contemporary life.



EARLY:
Portrait de René de Gas, ca. 1855. Sold for \$204,000 at Christie's New York in May 2007.



LATE:
Trois danseuses jupes violettes, ca. 1896. Sold for £4.2 million (\$8.2 million) at Sotheby's London in February 2007.