

ON MY OUTLOOK AS A PAINTER: A MEMOIR

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Abstract—*The author discusses the limits of freedom enjoyed by an artist. He describes his childhood influences and traces his reactions to developments in painting since the impressionists, especially in regard to the American scene. He discusses, in particular, the circumstances surrounding his abstract expressionist paintings and his recent work based on the geometry of the rectangle.*

In the studio I have the illusion of autonomy. I make sketches, drawings, plans and tack them on the wall. I consult preceding paintings and consider strategies for the next one. I make purely automatic drawings on scratch pads that take moments to do and make hundreds of them, saving a few, throwing most of them away. Out of these the seeds of paintings sometimes come. Some relate to what I am doing, others are reserved as maybes. Maybe I get to them—maybe not. I have also made whole series of paintings extending over a considerable period of time, several years, that I have mentally disowned or rolled up or confined to the warehouse. They turned out to be deviations, departures, searches that for whatever reason did not, after a while, win my adherence. Nevertheless, the experience enlarged my view of my painting.

In the end, the work that I have exhibited contains, I believe, an element of self-portrayal that, for better or worse, I can reconcile to myself without embarrassment. I would not be comfortable with a painting that was too aggressively stated or too sleek or too self-consciously simple, or too beautiful or too interesting. I am uncomfortable with extreme portrayals. I let reason examine disorder. A certain amount of censorship results that one could call form.

Nevertheless, I am not immune to pitfalls. And I pray that I will not come to regret this attempt at saying something about myself, as I have in the past.

I said that in the studio I have the illusion of autonomy. I mean that when I am working I shut out as nearly as possible the influence of precedents. I guide myself by eye or by intuition, which is perhaps

the same thing. It is not likely I would make a change in a painting just on theoretical grounds. The eye always asks: 'Does it look right or does it look wrong.' It often takes some time for the eye to get used to something that was at first disturbing. What looked uncomfortable today may look all right in a day or two. The eye, too, is like a spy. It tries to answer the question always posed in a painting, not always answered: 'Is it true or is it false?' If one can live with it, it is probably true. The approval of others does not help if one cannot.

What is the relation of reason to feeling. Reason chooses the ground where the play of feeling is set free. Reason simply says this ground, not that—not everywhere, but here. It does not so much limit as it contains.

The eye implies the body. Certain types of brushing meet the mood, maybe the need, of the body, the way certain kinds of motion meet the mood and need of a dancer. These brushings, these motions and their rhythms are, therefore, not always the same. They vary naturally. Within any given series under the dominance of a given theme, variation takes place in individual paintings attributable to purely ephemeral but recurring and characteristic moods. Color may show similar variations—subject to theme and modified by the mood of the moment. Always and everywhere there is the interplay between the projected theme and the play of the moment as paint is brushed on the surface.

However, the painter does not live in the studio only. Not all the influences on his work originate there, obviously. Outside the studio the painter's autonomy encounters challenge and resistance. The forces that impinge on him are not in his control and these have incalculable effects on the conditions that envelop and shape his work. The consciousness that is his in the studio is immediately modified when he steps outside.

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There he encounters the work of other painters, which reinforces or detracts from his own; the galleries that will or will not show his work; the museum curators who include or exclude him from important shows; critics that praise, condemn or ignore; and, finally, the buyer and collector. Together they make up the art world, the market and the politics of art. It would take enormous vanity to pretend that these forces do not affect a painter's development. Since undeniably they affect his chances of survival, how could it be otherwise? In a market-orientated culture they not only determine the rewards, they determine the range and profile of the audience with whom he can communicate. They constitute, in effect, a market like any other, casting its influence on the make-up of the artist and the product traded.

I do not believe ambition for fame and money is a factor in the genesis of an artist. Nor are they the prime targets even when the painter has entered the market. For the struggle for self-recognition, perhaps even more acutely for self-formation, runs parallel to the making of every painting and is a lifelong, never-ending struggle. But outside the painter's consciousness of himself, what other evidence of recognition is there and what other means of survival are there if not fame and money?

The painter who voluntarily chooses poverty and obscurity is surely a myth. I have never met the painter who, however successful, thought that he had received his full measure of rewards, who did not carry a heart full of grievances. (And if he concealed his hurt, his wife or widow generally did not.)

If I put some emphasis on this point, it is out of chagrin. The artist's personality has been grotesquely romanticized as his position from which to exert an influence on the social fabric of his time has declined. I do not speak, of course, of those artists who have the mass media at their command. While the romanticized image of the artist excludes such features as competition for riches, he may, nevertheless, exploit this image quite effectively in the marketplace.

The politics of art are not the only condition obtruding on the artist's autonomy. The period in which he lives is as much a condition of his development as time and place is for the development of every person. Where the artist differs from the average person is perhaps, one hopes, in his greater sensibility and sharper response to time and place. But it would be absurd to assign to the artist an autonomy free from time and place. He is always the product not only of his gifts but of his period and, more specifically, of the nation and city in which he lives, regardless of whether he is a comfortable or alienated member. Consider the possibility that personal genius was rarely enough for a

Spaniard, a German or a Russian to enter the context of the art of his time prior to World War I if he did not take up life in Paris; after World War II if he did not live in New York. It suggests that at certain periods certain cities are viewing lenses of the world. In them the world is telescoped.

If one asked what is the true meaning of abstract art, one answer could very well be that Paris and New York gave birth to it in the twentieth century.

I came to New York when I was twelve, a year or so before World War I. Neither my father nor my mother were natives of the town where I was born. At that time Russia still ruled that part of Poland; my father's tailor shop was contracted to the officers' corps of a Russian army regiment and the shop moved with the regiment from Russia to Poland. A widower with five children, he contracted a marriage with my mother, a childless divorced woman from a neighboring village. It was a frustrating marriage. My mother never quite forgot the ten years she was married to a man she loved but who could not give her a child. My father was to find his new wife a rather sad and unhappy woman, whose main role in the house was to shield her children from my father's brood. In return, the hostility to their stepmother made our house a precarious place for me.

My father was an affectionate person and I sought to escape my mother's care-sodden concern by turning my childhood love on him. Nevertheless, I remember my childhood as alienated within my home. My father's shop (and home) was near the officers' club in a non-Jewish section. I do not remember being at ease in either the Jewish or non-Jewish sections of the town. The pleasures I remember are walks with my father in the woods and meadows around the town, swimming on sunny mornings in a clear placid pond, playing with my younger sister on the grounds of an old castle ruin reached through a breach in a wall bordering our yard.

The first years in New York I remember as the most painful in my life. Everything I loved in my childhood I missed in New York, everything that had been painful in my childhood grew to distressing proportions as my father's situation deteriorated in the new land and as I had to face a new culture and adolescence at the same time. What saved me then was reading, as soon as I learned English, by providing me with the transition both to the new culture and to my adolescence. In the public library, with the help of a loving and sympathetic woman librarian, a window opened on the world. I read everything within reach in English, French and Russian literature. I read all night at times and sat out my days in school listless and drowsy. By

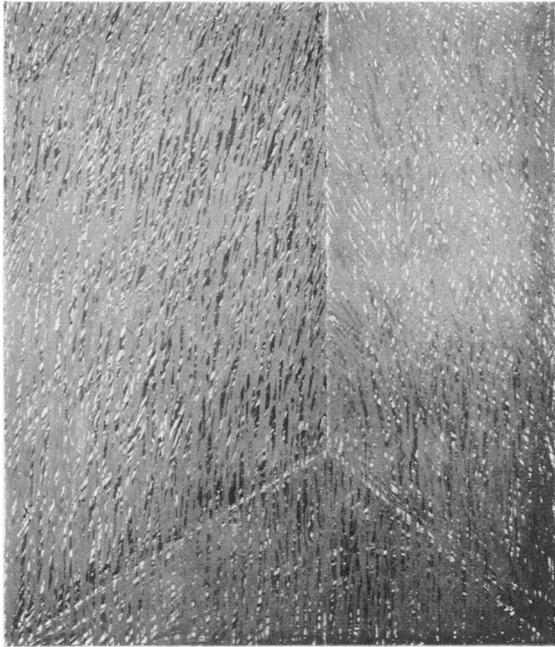


Fig. 1. 'Situation-L', oil on canvas, 80 × 70 in., 1969. (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.)

the time I was in my early twenties I became an avid reader of contemporary poetry and prose: Pound, Elliot, Frost, Cummings, Moore, Dos Passos, Joyce and Proust.

As soon as I could, I moved out of my parents' house and found refuge in Greenwich Village. It was in the early twenties in the Village that I was to experience for the first time in my life something like a sense of community. It was also in the early twenties that I saw the paintings of Cézanne and Matisse for the first time, which became an important factor that led me out of college into art school.

But although I found a community in the Village, it was a community of alienated people—runaways from every part of America.

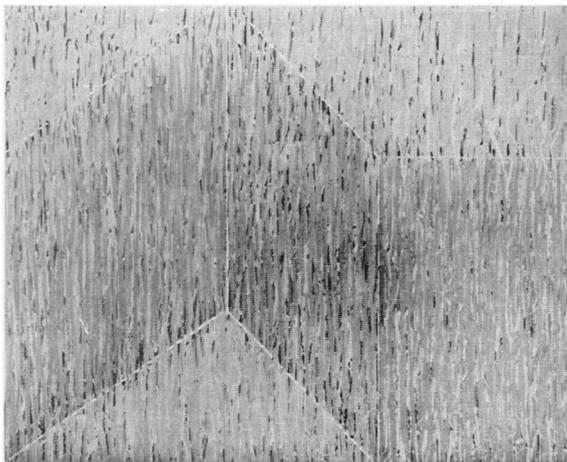


Fig. 2. 'Bend', oil on canvas, 50 × 62 in., 1969. (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.)

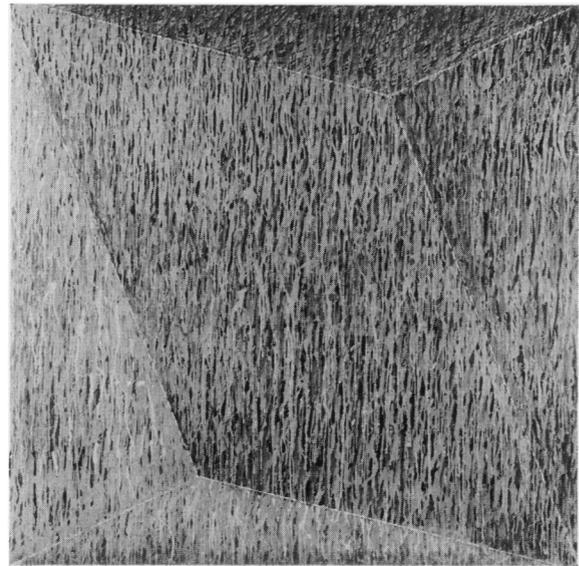


Fig. 3. 'Mirror', oil on canvas, 80 × 80 in., 1970. (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.)

Yet New York was and remains as near as possible my home ground, since I can move around in Manhattan anywhere between Chinatown and Harlem and stop and be stopped by people I know or who know me. I have many acquaintances and some friends at every level of society. I have also visited and spent extended periods of time in nearly every part of the country. Nevertheless, the feeling that I have been an alien in the world persists with me to this day.

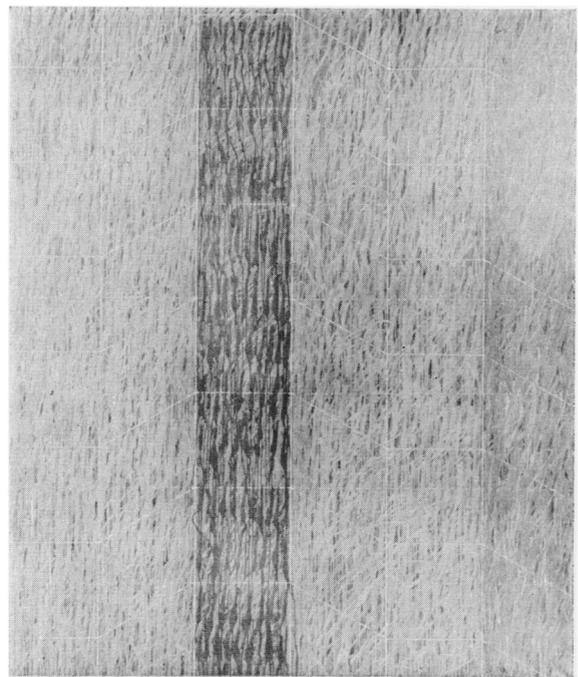


Fig. 4. 'S' R-P' + -70-No. 6' oil on canvas, 90 × 75 in., 1970. (Collection of the Whitney Museum, New York.) (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.)

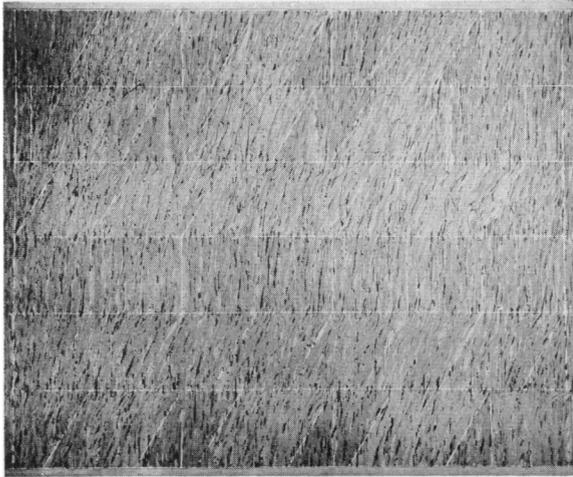


Fig. 5. 'Crossfield, III', oil on canvas, 80 × 96 in., 1970. (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.)

I must confess I am not the most venturesome person. I suspect the most venturesome are likely to start from the most secure home base. They court the alien. But I have known alienation all my life. It holds no romance for me. My striving is not for the far-off or far-out landscape but for the identification and naturalization of a home ground.

My strivings as an artist are, then, in the direction of a continuing process, in spite of my age, of self-definition and toward the comprehension of the culture around me and my relationship to it.

I am aware, within myself, of a large mound of dissatisfaction and even distrust of much of twentieth-century art and of much that passes for significant innovation now. I have few heroes and, as I read twentieth-century art history and wander through the modern art museum, I am often full of doubts.

Today I see in Impressionism, in Monet and Pissarro, but especially in Cézanne, a rebirth of painting after nearly two centuries of decadence; the fauves and especially Matisse, the cubists, especially Picasso of the 1911–13 period, carrying the innovations of the impressionists to new heights.

But after a century full of wars, it becomes apparent that art is more and more in the same limbo as religion—patronized to be sure but expelled from the most critical centers of concern. Art, which in the nineteenth century took up its exile in bohemia, exhibits two faces in reaction to the violent, vulgar world: one tragic in search of pure form, the other comic in search of new outrage. On the one hand Mondrian, on the other Dada, Surrealism and their multiple offshoots.

In America the confluence of these forces has produced a revolving dizziness of movements. These are represented by efforts to encroach on the mass media (primarily by the use of photographs); attempts to integrate industrial materials and manufacturing methods into art objects and rather pathetic strivings (in the face of hundred-story buildings, mile-long bridges, rocketry and space technology) after gigantism. Also pathetic, I think, is the leaning on science and more recently on linguistics to give art an aura of seriousness.

On the other hand, we have non-art and anti-art theatre instead of objects—presentations, happenings, heavy earthworks and light conceptual finger exercises—reaching some sort of high in so-called body art. All of these exhibit the unhappiness on the Left with what is normally called painting and sculpture, an unhappiness that matches that which exists on the Right.

In the absence of a unifying believable central core to our civilization and culture, the ruling

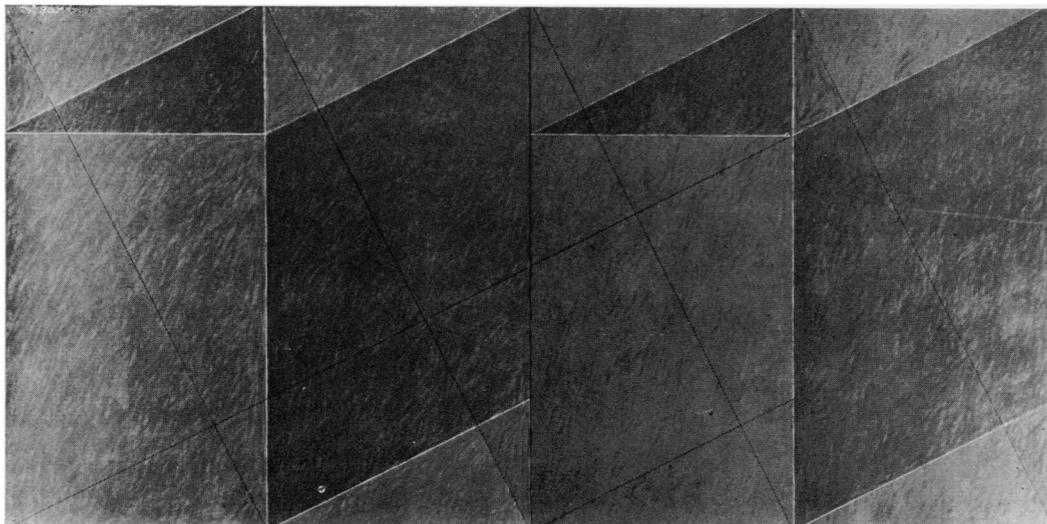


Fig. 6. 'Diptych, II', oil on canvas, 76 × 152 in., 1972. (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.) (Collection of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.)

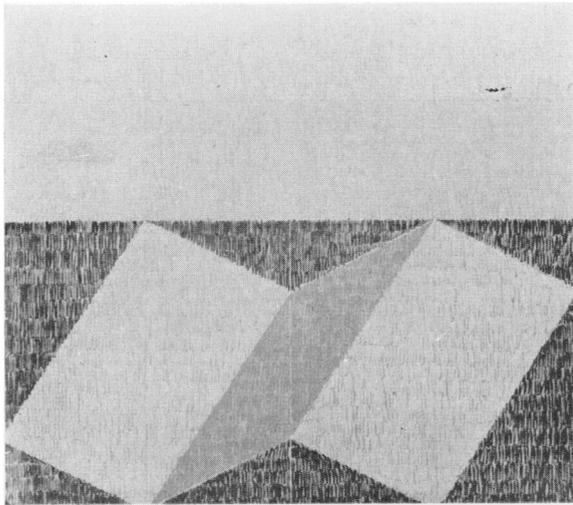


Fig. 7. 'Q3-72-No. 1', oil on canvas, 71 × 80 in., 1972.

middle class, which during the Dada period was the target of outrageous art, now preens itself as the patron and advocate of every outrage-as-innovation. It has co-opted bohemia and captured its style and established it as typically bourgeois. This might have been something to celebrate if one could ignore the television and radio commercials or the general chaos wrought in our cities and countryside, the vulgarization of life and politics for which the same class is also to be held responsible.

To be sure without bringing in art history and sociology one could trace the development of abstract painting by following the purely formal development step by step from Impressionism through Fauvism, through Cubism to Mondrian and the abstract-expressionist movement in New York after World War II. Nevertheless, I sense that a social-psychological element was all the same present in this development. It strikes me that this element was the vacuum left in Western art by the emptying out of the religious and mythical element that had provided the essential ground for a significant and believable subject matter. There was nothing in our century to take the place of a universally significant and believable subject matter. (Although Marxist artists thought there was, they could not develop a meaningful iconography—only banal clichés.) This led to the emptying out of the picture of all exterior reference, leaving it to the still and movie camera to record and comment. In a sense, the abstract painting, which most typically represents the iconography of the post-religious age, consciously or unconsciously expresses an element of despair that runs like a thread through our century and that is an ingredient in all serious abstract painting. I sense it in my own work as I do in Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko and, among the younger painters, Johns. In classic art there

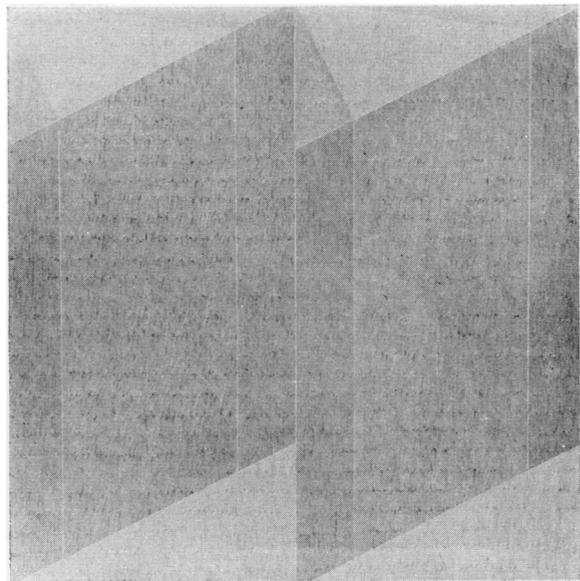


Fig. 9. 'Q3-72-No. 5', oil on canvas, 72 × 72 in., 1972.

was a face-to-face dialogue between artist and patron. It was the patron that most often determined subject matter. In a market-oriented culture, this has become all but impossible. And if it were possible, it would be destructive to let the masters of the market place decide on subject—better the empty canvas.

Because I find it difficult to talk about my own work directly, I have tried in this piece to talk round it, pointing obliquely to my work and attitudes. But I should add something about a change that crept into my work about 1965 and has developed in the paintings that I have made these last five or six years.

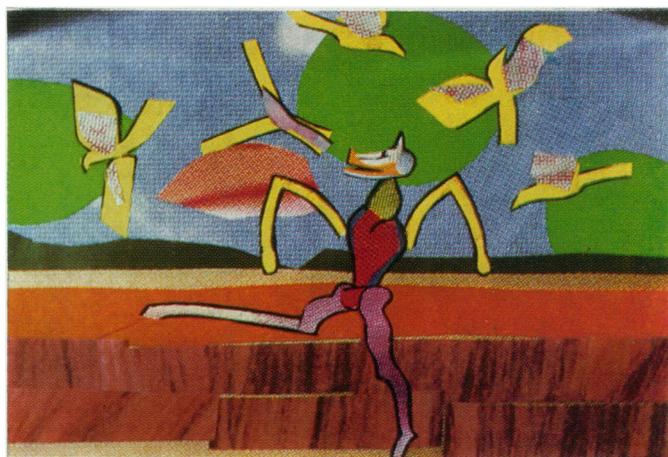
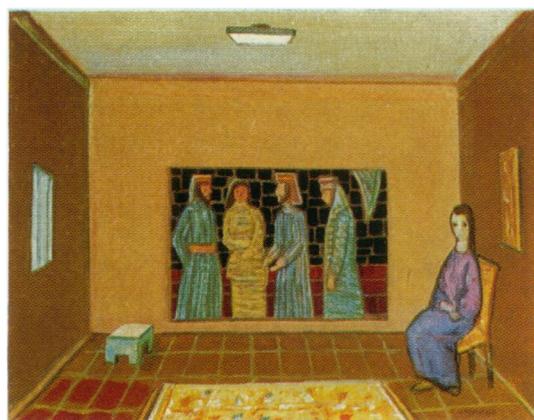
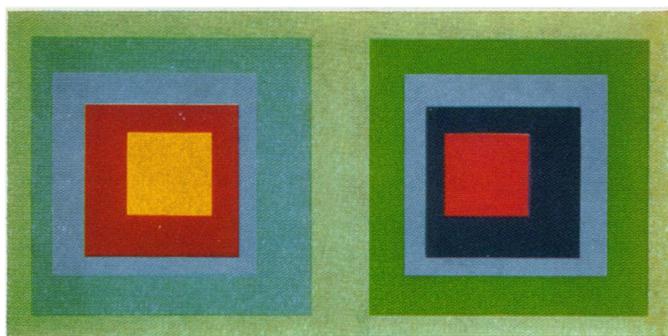
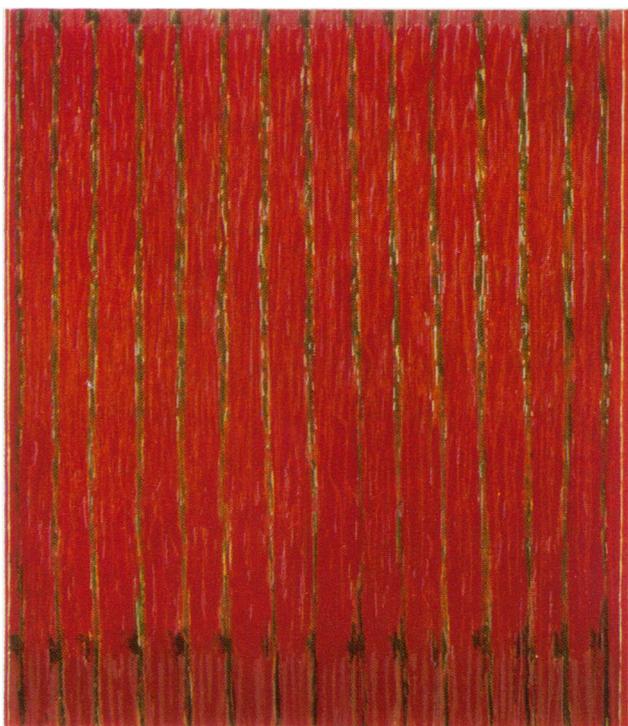
Post-World War II painting in New York moved against two repressive experiences—the rhetoric of Social Realism, preached especially by the artists and ideologues on the arts projects of the thirties, and the hegemony of Paris in modern art. The response was an art that stood against all formulas, an art in which impulse, instinct and the automatic, as guides to interior reality, were to usurp all forms of intellectualizing. I cannot remember any period in my life that so went to my head as 1949. I marked the foundation of the Artist's Club in New York and heralded a decade of painting as fruitful and revolutionary as the Impressionism of 1870.

But by the end of the fifties, I felt that the automatic aspect of abstract-expressionist painting of the gestural variety, to which my painting was related, had reached a stage where its forms had become predictable and automatically repetitive. Besides, the exuberance that was a condition at the birth of this painting could not be maintained without pretense forever.

At the end of the fifties, I began to look around for more disciplined and contemplative forms. Although I have had practically no training in any branch of mathematics and little or no competence in any field of it, in 1965 I began to study elementary geometry and some aspects of the number system. I became fascinated with the little I learned and found in some aspects of the geometry of a rectangle a new starting point for composing a painting. An example of the kind of naive question that was a starting point for me is the following: Given any rectangle, what line can I draw that is not arbitrary but is determined by the rectangle? I soon arrived at an elementary system of measurements implicit in the geometry of the rectangle that became the basis for simple images, which I had deliberately given a somewhat illusionistic cast. From then on, all my

paintings began with carefully worked out drawings and measurements that I could repeat at will. But the actual painting I left to varieties of spontaneous brushing. What I wanted was a simple structure dependent on drawing as a base on which the brushing, spontaneous and pulsating, gave a beat to the painting somewhat analogous to the beat in music. I wanted, and I hope I arrived at, a painting style in which planning does not exclude intuitive and sometimes random play (Figs. 1–9) (Fig. 8, cf. color plate).

Above all else, I distinguish between painting and pictures (between Cézanne and Picasso). Where I have to choose between them, I choose painting. If I have to choose between painting and ideas—I choose painting; between painting and every form of theater—I choose painting.



Top, left: *J. Tworkov, 'Redfield', oil on canvas, 80 × 70 in., 1972. (Collection of Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York.) (Photo: R. E. Mates and P. Katz, New York.) (Fig. 8, cf. page 116.)*

Top, right: *Roger Ferragallo, 'Homage to Albers', stereo painting, acrylic on canvas, 24 × 48 in., 1972. (Photo: W. Vandouris, Oakland, Calif.) (Fig. 10, cf. page 103.)*

Center, right: *Mortimer Borne, 'The Room', oil on convex canvas, 24 × 30 in., 1973. (Fig. 4, cf. page 144.)*

Bottom, left: *C. Kerr, electroluminescent trial patches. (Fig. 2, cf. page 154.)*

Bottom, right: *Irving Kriesberg, 'He Makes Birds as Well as Other Creatures', frame from 16 mm. animated film 'Out of Into'. (Fig. 6, cf. page 109.)*