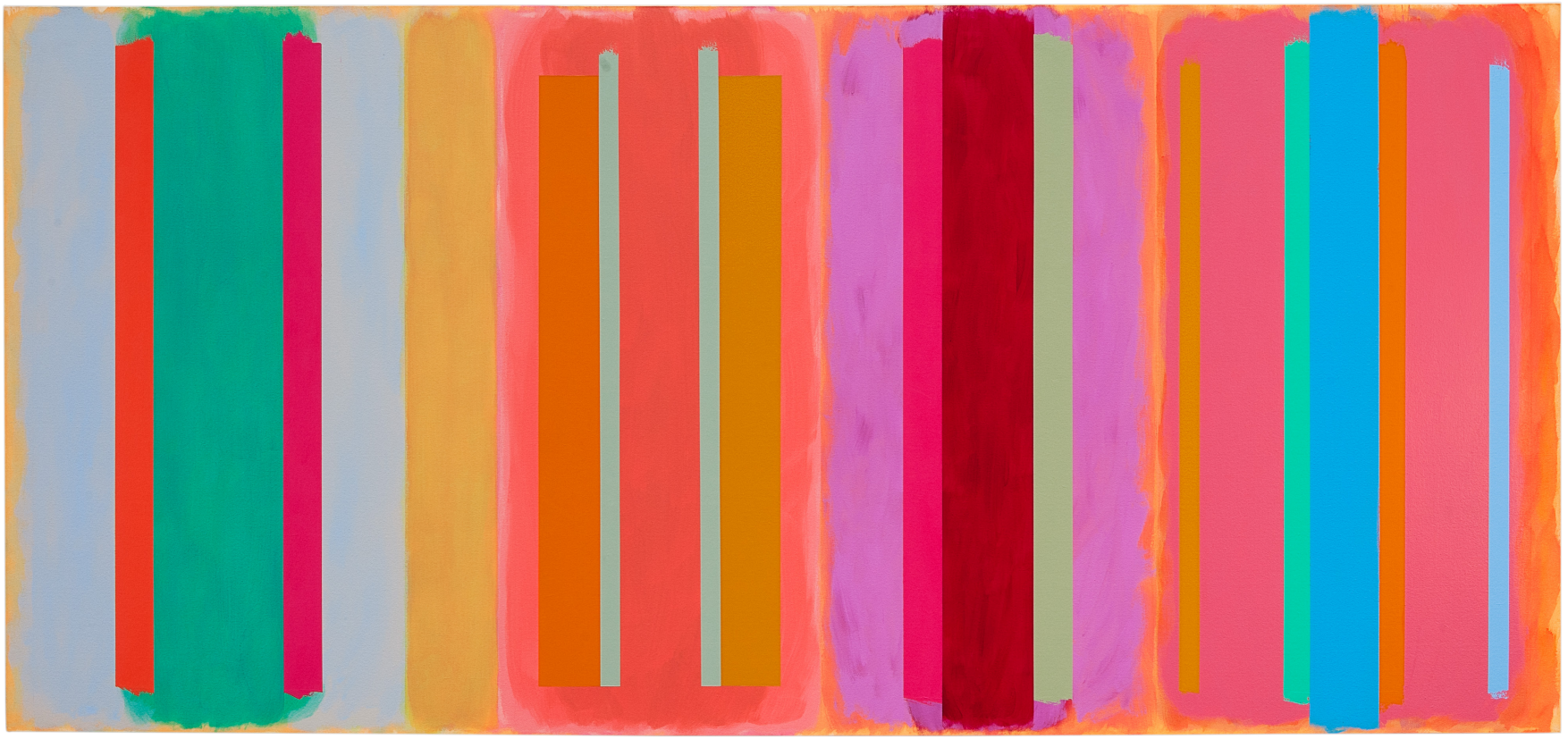

DOUG OHLSON

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20 Years of Painting: 1982 - 2002

Curated by Richard Stapleford, Professor of Art History

With the assistance of:
Michael Brennan, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art
Heeyoung Bae, MA Candidate
Johan Marby, MA Candidate
Allyson Spellacy, MFA Alumna

HUNTER COLLEGE / TIMES SQUARE GALLERY, October 10 - November 23, 2002

Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS, *Richard Stapleford*

Doug Ohlson is a prolific painter. The present show embraces his painting of the last twenty years, and recalls the exhibition Doug Ohlson: Two Decades, 1962- 1982 curated by Gene Goossen and held at Bennington College in 1982. The problem that I, as curator, faced was in displaying all the great works of his last twenty years without crowding each room with too many paintings. In order to do justice to the works the show is sparsely hung, allowing each painting breathing space. The result is an array of major works which leaps from masterpiece to masterpiece. A few rooms have a loose organizing theme such as the suite of four vermilion paintings or a group of paintings which illustrate different uses of black. In some rooms the connections between the works are slyer or purely intuitive. The exhibition is set up to allow viewers to find their own favorites, without the visual distraction of another too close by or the psychological distraction of a didactic program.

A number of individuals were essential in the planning and preparation of the exhibition. Jennifer Raab, the President of Hunter College, has been an unstinting supporter of the Art Department and the Gallery program. Professor Sanford Wurmfeld, Caroff Chair of Painting, Director of the Art Galleries and Chairman of the Art Department, conceived the idea of the Ohlson Show and shepherded it through its early stages. Tracy Adler, the Curator of the Hunter Galleries, and her staff led by the preparator/registrar Madelon Galland were the rock upon which the enterprise rested. Patricia Johanson, Gene Goossen's widow, generously allowed me to excerpt her husband's essay on Ohlson. I thank the institutional lenders including the J.P. Morgan Chase Bank, IBM, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the individual collectors Rochelle and Larry Sullivan, Tammy Keller and Jeffrey Goldstein, Mr. And Mrs. Michael D. McCarthy, and Susan Caldwell. The catalogue was made possible through the inspiration and support of Rosalie Wolff and the Solow Art and Architecture Foundation. I especially thank Alejandra Munizaga who designed the catalogue.

The team that put the exhibition together was a remarkable group. It consisted of my M.A. students Heeyoung Bae and Johan Marby, a recent Hunter M.F.A. graduate Allyson Spellacy, and my colleague, the painter Michael Brennan. I cannot imagine a better group to work with. Their dedication to the project as well as their distinct but complementary skills were of immeasurable importance to the outcome. And finally we all owe a debt to Doug Ohlson. He allowed us into his life through extended conversations and, most importantly, through his paintings. We have been changed by the experience, and we thank him.

When Doug Ohlson came to Hunter in the early 1960s he met Tony Smith, Gene Goossen and Ray Parker, three men who helped him shape his professional life through the opportunities and assistance they afforded him and, equally important, through the stimulus they provided his artistic development. Every artist is shaped to some degree by his predecessors' accomplishments. Ohlson was particularly fortunate to have found himself in the orbit of these three extraordinary people. He met them all at Hunter when he first came as a student and eventually became their colleague when he was invited to join the faculty.

Tony Smith was a brilliant artist with whom Ohlson spent time working as a studio assistant before Smith was to achieve his wider reputation. Smith's intellect was prodigious and his interests extremely broad. He traveled widely and and was close to many of the important painters in the postwar New York School. He recognized in Ohlson a talented young man attempting to resolve issues in painting in which Smith shared an interest and commitment. Smith was eventually to bring some of these ideas to greater fruition in his sculpture.

Gene Goossen had served as a combat pilot in the Air Force in World War II. Goossen's education had been interrupted by his war service and after his discharge he studied for a brief period in Paris at the Sorbonne. Then in the 1950s he taught art history and criticism at Bennington College, at that time a center of advanced thinking in the arts, under the chairmanship of Paul Feeley. His ideas about art were shaped by these experiences. They were straightforward, simply stated, and seminal to all who came under his influence. Ohlson was an early recruit to the artist-teacher team Goossen formed as Chair of the Art Department at Hunter — a dominantly male team, though he championed the work of Helen Frankenthaler and Pat Johannson among other women artists in exhibitions he curated.

Ray Parker, since he was a painter, was a more direct influence. Parker was the most formally educated of the three, having come out of the program at the University of Iowa at the time when that institution first became known for its involvement in the arts. Parker was already at Hunter when Goossen and Smith arrived in 1961 and they had in common a friendship with Robert Motherwell who had been at Hunter since the 1950s. Parker and Ohlson were both "color-field painters" so it is easy to understand their attachment, but Ohlson's work never had the "look" of any of Parker's paintings. Rather Parker was a mentor with whom Ohlson shared an interest in literature, philosophy and earlier color painters — especially Mark Rothko.

Ohlson was not the only painter to be affected by these three men. A cadre of color painters — sometimes dubbed the "Hunter Color School" — were on the faculty. Among the older generation were Julius Goldstein, Ron Gorchov, Ralph Humphrey, Vincent Longo and Mac Wells; contemporaries included George Hofmann and Robert Huot; and finally the slightly younger Robert Swain and myself. The 1960s and 1970s at Hunter and in New York was a fruitful period in the development of color abstraction and although this group of highly individual artists pursued different paths, they always stimulated each other as they went along. This exhibition which focuses on the last 20 years of Ohlson's work demonstrates the mature evolution of his painting since those earlier years of ferment.

We are most grateful to Professor Richard Stapleford for curating this show along with his team of current and former Hunter graduate students: Heeyoung Bae, Johan Marby and Allyson Spellacy. We also thank Adjunct Assistant Professor Michael Brennan for his input in the organization of the exhibition and his insightful contribution to this catalogue. Professor Stapleford and his team along with the gallery staff headed by Tracy Adler have made a most memorable aesthetic event. We all thank Doug Ohlson for his years of creating beautiful paintings as well as his devotion to this department, and now for his commitment to working with those who have put this remarkable exhibition together.

A group of Hunter College faculty ca. 1980. Standing left to right: Doug Ohlson, Anthony Milkowski, Ron Gorchov, Lyman Kipp, Vincent Longo, Robert Swain, Robert Morris, Ralph Humphrey, Robert Huot, Sanford Wurmfeld. Seated: Ray Parker, Tony Smith, Eugene Goosen.

Doug Ohlson: An Introduction to the Paintings

Richard Stapleford

Communication, in Doug Ohlson's paintings, is the expression of ordering systems suspended in delicate balance. His vocabulary is elementary — color, scale, shape, surface, line — and in that simplicity lies his universal acessibility. Each painting has the spontaneity of an improvisation and the inevitability of grammatical structure. And it bears the indelible imprint of the artist: the pressure of his hand in the feathered edges of a long pull of paint, his courtship of risk in the choice of hues, his sense of order in the taped bars, his embrace of disorder in the drip threatening the straight edge, and his love of mystery in the deep saturation of color.

The great contribution of post-war American painting was to define an artistic landscape in which the meaning of a painting did not depend on the special cultural apparatus of the viewer. American painters, perhaps driven in part by the exhiliration of a new beginning after the War and in part by the essentially democratic nature of American society, developed a language which depended on the viewing experience, the moment of contact between viewer and painting. They were implicitly opposing European painting which, since the beginning of the century, had draped itself in veils of intellectual mystification. The Abstract Expressionists and the Color Field painters began with a belief in the capacity of the viewer — any viewer — to grasp the essential experience of a painting. In a Rothko we can experience pure color as a unique viewing event. Pollock's and Kline's paintings are records of the balance and grace of the human body. The "accidents" of the Action Painters, the drip and splash, are reminders of the creative moment, the eternal present which characterizes our species. Like the outline of a human hand on a cave wall or Rembrandt's thumbprint in the shadow of a portrait, the act of creation is defined as a fragile moment.

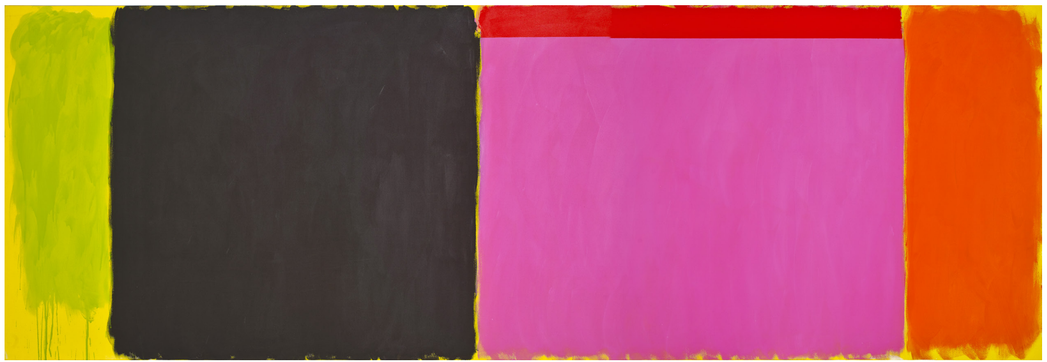
Born in 1936, old enough to have his sensibilities formed in the Great Depression and the Second World War, Ohlson built his character upon the American values of those times and his style upon the work of the giants of that period. He mentions Still, Pollock, Rothko and Kline as his earliest influences. From his friendship with Barnett Newman and Tony Smith he absorbed the vocabulary of interchange by which artists pass the mantle between generations, a vocabulary less of style than of substance — not the "how to," but the "what." He continues that interchange in his mentoring and support of young painters.

An important force in his stylistic development is his search for a stronger presence of the artist, the brush. His paintings from the 60s are in a geometric style in which the simple square or rectangular forms are balanced within and against the shape of the canvas. These pure compositions seek an equilibrium in the two-part harmony of shapes, of colors, and of field and image. Inevitably the paintings recall Minimalism in their simple shapes, flat colors and reductive compositions. In fact in 1967 Ohlson contributed a painting to a group show of Minimalist artists at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Connecticut. It is perhaps revealing that the painting, a grey field with a single blue square in one corner, was withdrawn when Donald Judd termed it "too romantic." Judd may have been right. In his long career Ohlson has consistently been unwilling, or unable, to be circumscribed by a "school." In 1970 he began a series of paintings in which he employed an automobile paint-sprayer to create puffy blobs of pure color afloat across the surface of the prepared canvas, as in Davy's (1973). This new technique seems, in retrospect, to be a search for a vocabulary which would free him from the dual restrictions of the flat surface and the hard edge. Perhaps a response to Rothko's deep atmospheric color fields with their blurred edges (Rothko is a painter whom Ohlson admires but at the same time denies any direct influence from), this new vocabulary of forms opened a door to expressive possibilities which his earlier geometric style had proscribed.

The beginning of the time span of the present exhibition, 1982, coincides with a change in Ohlson's style. With Toucan and Cadman's Blue, both 1982, he began to use translucent colors loosely painted in large, adjacent panels. Pictorial space in his earlier work was created by the vibration between two adjacent colors, as in Middle Zone (1981-82) where the blue panel in the center seems to bounce off the surface of the canvas. With these new transparent colors surface and depth are redefined as within the picture space, not in front of it. This is more than simply a different technique; it is a redefinition of the means to capture and guide the viewers experience. The panel of blue in Cadman's Blue draws the viewer's eye into the depth of the color and thereby, mysteriously, enriches the intensity of the contiguous red panel and gives 3-dimensional presence to the black panel.

The culmination of this stylistic moment is the 23-foot frieze painting Second Wind (1982) in which the interplay of color and the new internalized space are held in balance by the presence of drips and brushy edges, the "memory" of the artist's activity. In his discussion of the process of painting Second Wind Ohlson describes how, frustrated at the failure of the painting to successfully resolve itself, he "took a big trowel with a lot of black paint and just made a slash across the right hand side. And somehow it pulled the whole thing together." This rough horizontal black slash, with the drip record of the moment, is the catalyst that reminds the viewer that all the compositional and color systems at work in the painting are held in check by the mysteries of choice, by the artist.

The long horizontal format of Second Wind has the advantage of unfolding like a sequence in which the terms of the progression are related in linear fashion. Thus a system of dichotomies or polarities is mapped out to the viewer. This method is at the core of Ohlson's style. In Mexico Set (1985), for example,



Mexico Set, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 192 inches.

starting at the left, a panel of lemon yellow is overlaid by a transparent green which floats on the surface and drips down to the bottom edge. Pictorial space and gravity are firmly established, only to be challenged by an impossible square panel of opaque black. Where the yellow is bright, the black is dark, and where the green transparent, the black dense. Next in the progression to the right is a longer rectangle of deep pink floating in front of the yellow background. Resting roof-like upon the pink panel is a horizontal slab of weighty red which, like the dripping green at the left, responds to gravity, holding down the pink panel. But here it is the gravity of color, the tendency of the eye to see the pink as full of light, weightless, and the red as literally heavy. The horizontal line between the pink and the red is a taped straight edge, different from the free-hand edges in the rest of the composition, confirming the architectonic relationship between the two colors. The sequence concludes with a narrow panel of dark orange boxing the right side of the frieze, a firm and solid finale. In conventional terms this orange is the wrong choice to place next to either the similar deep red or the dissimilar light-filled pink, but through some strange alchemy of vision it works perfectly. This is a characteristic Ohlson color event, an unexpected and deeply satisfying visual experience. Each term in the sequential equation of the whole painting derives its meaning from its position next to an antonym — whether color, opacity, size or space — and the entirety is held in delicate equilibrium, immediately perceptible but only gradually understood.

Another change in style is discernible beginning in the early 90s when Ohlson begins to focus on the expressive use of narrow taped bars. He had used taped edges for most of his career and bars began to appear in the 80s, but with Cat Eyes and Cad Med (both 1993) the bars assume a new importance. Simultaneously he begins to seek closer color connections. In Way of All Flesh (1994) a horizontal field of three panels of intermediate yellow-orange is enlivened by bars with admixtures of primary colors to make related hues. The panels and bars invade each other's space by loose overlapping edges and the whole glows with an even intensity. Where Mexico Set might be thought of as monophonic in its insistent linear melody, Way of All Flesh is polyphonic with multiple overlapping harmonies.

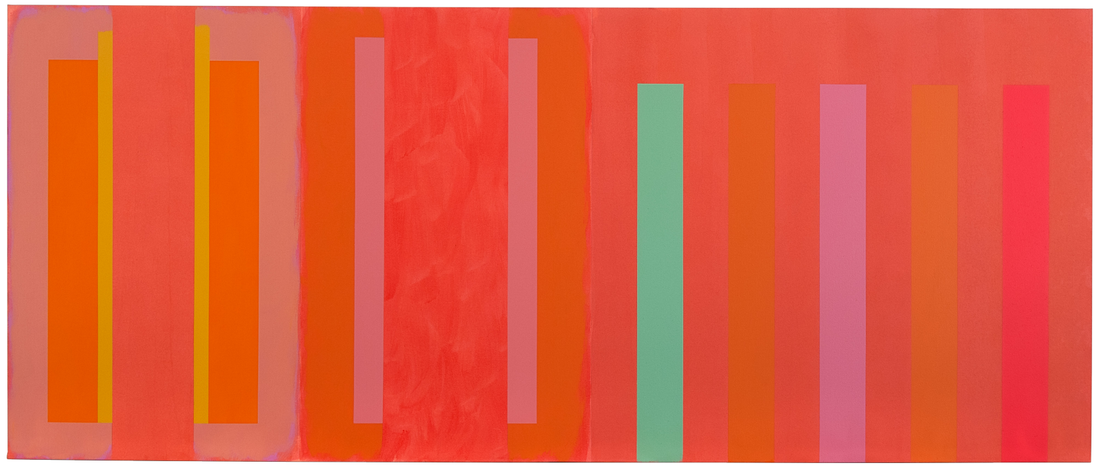
In Lost Twin (1996), a diptych composed of two 9 foot steles, the same vocabulary of close hues and blurred and straight edges is used, but with different effect. The tall panels have a human feel about them, as if the images exist in some space situated between representational painting and abstraction. Ohlson says that he was reading an article about twins at the time and he was impressed by the discovery that more twins are conceived than are brought to term, and that the surviving twin is often haunted by feelings of loss. What

viewer, remembering the title Lost Twin, can look at these two anthropomorphic verticals and not see the interactions of color and form as metaphor? The contrasting blurred and straight edges, the almost obliterated sky-blue, the slightly narrower, emaciated dimension of the right panel, all evoke loss and longing. Since the title came after the painting, as Ohlson says, it is an example of the intuitive naming of his works in which he seeks a subconcious connection between the painting process and his own experience. In titling his works, he says, "I like the idea of a kind of residue, a surrealist way where you can sort of get an idea, but you don't quite get it." The work carries its narrative weight almost imperceptibly, but it is richer for the title.

The decade of work leading up to the present has seen a sea change in Ohlson's style. Instead of the powerful contrasts which animated many of his works of the 80s, he now produces more closely harmonized canvases. In Fall 2001, for example, he has arranged a horizontal sequence of vertical bars, taped and free-hand, across an insistent light-absorbing brick-red background. The relationship of adjacent colors is still of primary importance but now the harmony is more finely tuned, the close-order sequence more subtle. Pink, rose, and reddish-orange embrace and verge in an absorbing ballet, flirting with pattern, but always subverting expectation at the last moment. Ohlson says he wants a painting "to be to be about as dumb as it could be," meaning he wants to avoid the appearance of intellectual control, of planning. The interaction of color in a painting should be an event, one in which the coversation is spontaneous and unpredictable. The relationship of the vertical bar-units to each other is successful because they seem to be accidentally placed, different in length and position.

Ohlson says he likes "to throw in a little wrench." In Fall 2001 that wrench is the green stripe. (He is perfectly aware of the Matisse connection here. Could he also be encoding an homage to Red Studio, one of his favorite paintings, in the all-over red background?) It is a remarkable optical effect, lifting off the flat surface that Clement Greenberg identified as the fundamental "truth" of painting, and floating in our space. The green stripe is the thing that doesn't "belong," but its presence is the mark of the artist, like the outline of a hand on a cave wall, unexpected against the elegant balance and rhythm of the rest of the composition. It reminds us of our own isolation.

A Doug Ohlson painting is an intense and unique viewing experience. For the viewer it is both a guide along an unknown path of discovery and a confirmation of the concrete reality of order. To know that the painter measured and divided, chose unexpected combinations of color, risked banality and cliché — the dangers of sensual color and predictable order — and tilted at the windmill of inarticulateness, is to be reassured for a moment of the communality of our experience.



Fall 2001 (Green Line). Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 144 inches.

Studio Time

Michael Brennan

I came to Doug Ohlson through his painting. I had seen a large one through the street window of Andrè Zarre's former Soho gallery, night after night, while walking to and from my old studio. I can't picture the painting anymore as it really was, and I never knew its title, but I remember the colors were of different weights and densities and that they seemed, to me, to be located as opposed to being arranged. It was exactly the kind of painting nobody was talking about at the time. I called Doug not long after because this was the sort of conversation I was looking to have.

Our friendship was immediate and Doug hired me on an occasional basis to help out in his studio. I was by no means Doug's only studio assistant; I was one in a legion of available artists and actors. I hesitate to call it work even now because, although some labor was involved, I spent many more overpaid hours sitting around his kitchen table talking with him about painting and painters' issues, Mets baseball, crime novels and other wonderful diversions. Not that we weren't getting anything done, but Doug is an easy person to lose time with. When he smiles in conversation his face shrinks. It gets tight around the outside edges of his eyes, which pinch together in the corners like a pair of crab claws.

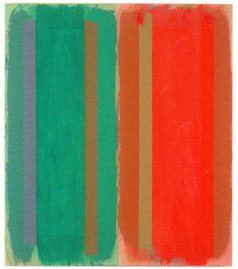
The studio work itself was tedious. Doug paints on large canvases that are stretched across wall-length working stretchers. It takes very strong hands to pull the canvas taut — in some situations away from the body without leverage. Doug handles all of the actual painting, including the underpainting, himself. Once the paintings are completed they are cut down from the main swaths and restretched on individual stretchers. They often have to be restretched several times in order to regain their original tautness. Doug calls this "fine tuning." Unlike many artists I've known Doug is never impulsive regarding the small steps of handling a painting. He employs thorough, time tested processes for dealing with the necessary but mundane aspects of making a painting, insuring that no finished surface is ever damaged, and, generally speaking, that no material is wasted. We took our time and made few wrong turns.

His choices regarding important matters, such as color, remain a mystery. Doug always has all manner of painted test colors placed around the perimeter of his studio where they can be considered against a work in progress, the wall or each other. His sense of color is completely unconventional and his color choices are loaded with surprises, combining color into the most thrilling and unexpected event possible. The experience of producing a rare color event seems more important to him than the application of any prescribed color relationship. Since Doug is absolutely unprejudiced in his handling of color, every decision in the studio is made through an extended act of observation. Painting is ultimately about character. Doug's character expresses itself in color.

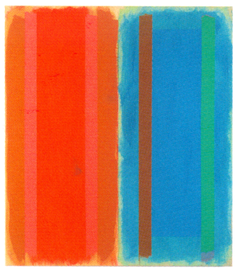
What I admired most about Doug's studio practice was the artist's own flexibility. A good painter has to think on his feet in order to respond well to unexpected change in the course of making a painting. Doug excels at this. He can be calculated and rational in the presence of the familiar, and yet, when confronted with an uncertainty on the plane, respond by remaining open and intuitive. Many of the paintings included in this exhibition betray his willingness to change course in midst of completing a painting. In some ways the paintings are about this risk. Doug also happens to be better than most about knowing when to stop, knowing exactly when to leave a painting.

An old studio mate, another painter and a former student of Doug's, filled me in on what Doug had been like as a painting instructor at Hunter College. "I found that one ignores Doug's advice on the subject of painting at one's own peril," he said. "Doug once told me never paint yellow in the upper left hand corner of a painting, and damned if he wasn't right!" I never received any information quite so specific, but Doug's advice remains good counsel and always cuts straight to the heart of the matter. When I told Doug about a pending trip to Italy, perhaps overexcited in anticipation of seeing Tintoretto firsthand, he responded flatly, "He doesn't do it for me," and then quietly added, ". . . try to see as many Caravaggio's as you can." Doug's observations on other painters, whether Caravaggio, Courbet, Pollock, or his own contemporaries, always proved solid.

Doug came to my studio not long after I began working for him. He intently examined my paintings, which at that time were painted mostly in shades of gray. I expressed some misgivings about my non-handling of color — clearly I was intimidated by it. A week or so later, as I was exiting after working another afternoon in his studio Doug said to me, "You said you were interested in working more with color. I left a bucket of paints that I'm throwing out by the door." I took the bucket to my studio and inside I found fifty or so unopened new tubes of pricey cadmium and cobalt colors — much more than I could afford on my own, either financially or psychically. Even had I been given the money I wouldn't have picked out so many different colors. Doug gave me an expanded range of color. I've used up nearly all of that paint by now, but I'm still working through everything else that he put in the bucket.



Untitled, 1998-99
Acrylic on canvas
32 x 28 inches



Untitled, 1998-99
Acrylic on canvas
32 x 28 inches

E.C. Goossen

Eugene C. Goossen was a critic and curator and served as chairman of the art department at Hunter College in New York from 1962-72. Before his death in 1996 he had prepared an essay on Ohlson for a monograph that never came about. The following is an abridgement of that longer piece (the full text is available on the internet at http://www.artnet.com) and is presented here in memory of Gene Goossen. (R. S.)

Doug Ohlson was born in 1936 and grew up in the farming country of Cherokee, Iowa, 50 miles east of the Missouri River, a land of flatness and endless skies. His parents owned a largely self-sustaining family farm that had the usual barnyard life fed by the produce of a few hundred acres of hay, corn, and sometimes soy beans. His father was a second-generation Swede who looked forward to the day when his three sons would follow him in farming or, at least, go into some practical occupation. The mid-1930s was the deepest period of the Great Depression. To survive was the only reasonable goal so it is not surprising that Ohlson Sr. would have had little interest in encouraging any of his sons to engage in frivolous pursuits, especially such a career as art.

However, young Doug had a strong distaste for farming and over the years following high school managed to work his way in and out of four different colleges (as well as a three-year stint in the U.S. Marines) before graduating from the University of Minnesota in 1961 where his major was, of course, art. That same year he moved to New York.

Ohlson arrived in New York with a painterly style of the sort that was prevalent among younger artists trying to find their way beyond Abstract Expressionism. That he would have been attracted to Franz Kline's powerful mannerist brushstroke and direct discovery of his black and white paintings is not surprising. Indeed, for Ohlson it was not at all difficult to produce successful works in a Klinesque style. But Ohlson soon realized that this approach had little to offer him other than an academic role in what had already become a vogue — Action Painting.

One of several things he may have gotten from his study of Kline, however, was that complete paintings could be made with two "colors." This fact was substantially reconfirmed when, in 1963, he revisited the Art Institute of Chicago and encountered a newly acquired painting by Clyfford Still, entitled PH-246, 1951-52, a 10 by 13 foot canvas which consisted of a vast single-colored area of palette-knife worked paint interrupted only by a crooked thin line dropped from the top toward the bottom of the rectangle two-thirds of the way from the left. This wiry crack was the only overt incident in the painting. Though Ohlson had no affection for Still's work he describes his reaction as, "So that's what it's all about!"

OHLSON AND COLOR

Ohlson stands at the current end of a long line of painters who have in various ways revealed that color is the music of visual art: color, like music, is abstract, sensuous, and sufficient unto itself. He has been developing his own ways and means to work with this approach for some 30 years. Until the end of the 19th century color had to be used in a subterfuge of associations and as a means rather than an end. It had to support all other forms of materiality except those exceptional to itself. One of the greatest contributions of modern art in this century has been the effort to release color frankly and openly from secondary roles. Even Matisse, who made such a major contribution with his kind of color, was reluctant to abandon a modicum of illusion of nature in his pictures.

Matisse was unable to find another way to prevent his art from becoming totally decorative. It is Ohlson's passionate preoccupation with this unfinished problem in modern art that makes post-modernism a non-sequitur and his work so essential to the continuation of painting as a vital art. It is hoped that the comments that follow on individual paintings will make clear how Ohlson has, often adroitly, met the problem of giving color the full freedom it deserves.

Color on a plane surface is what defines painting as such. Hegel had pointed this out before Chevreul and the Impressionists, and before modern color science. Up to the late 19th century, painters who were considered superior in the use of color were called "good colorists," implying that artists filled in black and white drawings with attractive hues. The ultimate goal in the modernist drive toward pure abstraction has been to make color cling to the surface in ways that give only an inkling of naturalistic space while yet engaging our sensuous perception of its pictorial vitality. Matisse, in his great radical picture Red Studio of 1911, demonstrated that a single all-over color could create pictorial unity while supporting a variety of visual shapes that give hints of the illusory space of another world. The object, of course, is to make the painting express itself not as a picture of something but as a real object in the world.

The critic Clement Greenberg carried a great deal of weight with the painters of his day, the Abstract Expressionists. His concept that non-illusionistic "flatness" was the essential characteristic of modern painting became the challenge and the burden of his period (1940-60): "The story of modern painting is not that of a flight as such from the imitation of nature, but rather of the growing rejection of an illusion of the third

Cadman's Blue, 1982. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 x 180 inches.

dimension." For younger artists coming on in the `60s, the shadow of the previous generation lay heavy on them. To create pictures to serve "flatness is all" the older painters had each devised a personal solution for making a picture that conformed to Greenberg's dictum and yet avoided the purely decorative. The "second generation" followed suit: Frankenthaler identified the canvas surface by soaking her drawing and colors into it; Ellsworth Kelly placed emphasis on the distinctive shapes of his single-area colors; Jasper Johns chose flags, maps and other flat subjects. But the catalogue of devices grew thinner and options harder to find. Many artists moved back to neo-realism or toward sculpture. Some abandoned painting altogether. A few others, like Ohlson, were determined to keep the art of painting alive.

In Cadman's Blue, 1982, he began to push into new territory. After absorbing the broad and brooding nighttime colors one notices the brushed, light-revealing edges of the vertical rectangles and the broken horizontal bands across the top. This picture is no casual expressionistic effort, however. but is constructed with the taste and discipline of a seasoned hand and eye.

Ohlson had long since mastered opaque hues as such. Now he opened the seams between them, letting air into some of them by manipulating the density of the surface. In Toucan, 1982, he not only pits the brushy panels of color against the opaque ones but also develops an overlap of brushed blue and allows a free-flying dash of crimson into a neat vertical of black. This new spatial excursion is not deep. Panels float in an area defined by the forward layers of bright color and the somber colors behind. He has thus subtlely created a whole new context for his kind of color painting.

Ohlson's transition from the cool, flat, hard-edged style of his work in the 60s to a denser, space-enriched approach was not simply accidental. The years of coping with the presentation of colors mainly for their optical qualities to differentiate their spatial relations to each other now paid off in many ways. As he introduced a dialogue between the optical and the sensual it enabled him to reach a kind of authentic space for color painting. Ohlson was, indeed, escaping from the Minimalism of his earlier work but he was not creating fixed and final statements; he is a painter, not a theoretician.

After Toucan, large geometric panels of opaque color are rarer and eventually disappear altogether, replaced by more painterly sections. Elongated solid color panels remain, however, since they are necessary to the spatial dialogue. They are, of course, the secret to the most forward affirmation of the canvas plane in physical rather than optical terms.

Format and Composition

The usefulness of an underlying order against which Ohlson plays his colors in their variable verticals and horizontals brings a satisfying animation to our experience. The normal optical response to a horizontal painting is to divide it in two equal halves corresponding, perhaps, to our eyes and arms. In his Mexico Set, 1985, Ohlson meets that expectancy head on and uses it to reinforce the weight of a huge black area with five other brilliant colors. In Bridgehampton, 1988, several pastel colors meld themselves quite differently into one harmonic field and allay our tendency to divide them.

Spirit Lake, 1990, transcends the more overt solutions of the two preceding pictures, adding a mood and drama that Ohlson began to reach for in the 90s. His binding of the unequal parts with the opaque red vertical makes sure the picture does not sag inward at the center. The far left introduction of a pale translucent green illuminating the beneficent blue's edge prevents it from fading into meaningless space.

Med, 1989, shows the degree to which Ohlson can create space, activate and complicate it with his simple units of color. Who would have guessed that by floating four flat pieces of red, blue and orange, perfectly scaled and distributed, such a three-dimensional result would occur. This, of course, happens against a highly charged back-drop of golden light fading to forest darkness.

By 1994 Ohlson had again stretched the possibilities of his accumulated knowledge of how to bind colors to the surface and at the same time move them quietly back and forth within an acceptable but limited space. Way of All Flesh, 1994, is a horizontal divided into three vertical plots that play paled hues against slightly stronger versions of themselves or their complements. The slenderness of these vertical areas create a new rhythm in his horizontals. Here there is a broad rectangle within which the divisions function like the figures in a sixth-century Byzantine mosaic, where the eye sees both the group and the distinctive individual portraits.

Medley, 1995, shows how Ohlson can take a new and ambiguous structural approach and enlarge it by changing his sensual and emotional projections through color. This painting has an additional vertical compared to Way of All Flesh, its predecessor, and it expands the format from a trinity to a divisible field. Three cannot split in half without self-destruction, while four elements can easily break into two equal parts. Ohlson seems to like this balancing act and usually pulls it off. Here he is trusting the viewer's visual memory to follow the plentiful green left of center and see it stand for itself as an equalizing force in two slim stripes on the right. The bright, light blues which give the work its zing, like the green and yellows, are actually picked up and out of the background, where they are nearly obscured, and laid open in the foreground. What is the most amazing (and intriguing) thing about this work is that the nonaggressive green "panel" becomes a main feature and carries the whole painting despite the piquant hues.

Conclusion

Childhood experiences are often formative, particularly in the realm of the senses. It is possible that Ohlson's obsession began during his youth on the farm. Every day the work of the farm began before dawn and continued after the return of the school bus in the late afternoon. The first requirements on his time were the chores. But there may have been compensations. One can imagine yellowish pink and green dawns, blue noons, and red-orange sunsets that swiftly slide from purple to black, panoramas frequent enough to last a lifetime. The world of the farm may have been down to earth but the world of the spirit was in the sky.

No matter how much the above discussion of his paintings may seem to have systemized his methods, Ohlson remains an intuitive rather than a scientific artist, one dedicated to making color come alive and speak for itself. He has accomplished this through his sensuous eye, trained in nature and nurtured in art.

Ohlson family barn, ca. 1958, Cherokee, Iowa.

A Conversation with Doug Ohlson

Doug Ohlson was born in 1936 and grew up on his family's farm near Cherokee, Iowa, the son of second generation Swedish parents. He attended Iowa State College and Bethel College in Iowa before joining the Marines. After discharge he earned a BA in Fine Arts from the University of Minnesota in 1961 and came to New York City. He worked at a number of jobs before becoming a professor in the Art Department of Hunter College of the City University of New York. A leading member of the generation of painters who were heirs to the New York Abstract Expressionists, he has had 32 one-man shows since his first in 1964. He retired from teaching in 2001. He lives and works in New York City and recently he has spent summers working in Pietrasanta, Italy.

Saturday, April 6, 2002, Ohlson's studio.

Present with Doug Ohlson are:
Michael Brennan, Adjunct Assistant Professor of Painting, Hunter College
Heeyoung Bae, M.A. student
Johan Marby, M.A. student
Allyson Spellacy, M.F.A. alumna
Richard Stapleford, Professor of Art History

A.S. So Doug - how did you get into painting?

D.O. Well, I was really young. But there were no peers, there was nobody to look to. And so I drifted away from art. I started out in forestry in college, but it was a romantic idea. I didn't really know what it was. My buddy Dave became a smoke-jumper and I tried to get into the smoke-jumpers, but they wanted more than just somebody who wanted to jump out of a plane. They wanted someone who had some prior knowledge. So I got discouraged by that, and I just joined the Marines ultimately. That was like my Walden Pond.

J.M. Did the Marines change you in any way?

D.O. The Marines for me was not much of a deal at all, because it was easier than life on the farm. It was important in the sense that I said — being like my Walden Pond. It was a way of absolutely breaking one pattern, one way of life. Nobody could touch you there, they couldn't mess with you. And then you walked out the other end changed.

A.S. As you were growing up did you have much exposure to art?

D.O. I had seen paintings, besides in magazines, in Chicago and in Minneapolis. We took cattle into Chicago and then we'd go downtown to the Loop and look around the museums a bit. I had relatives in Minneapolis and so I'd go there sometimes. And we went on a couple of trips with my father. I saw the National Gallery in Washington pretty early on. I must've been fourteen or so.

A.S. You did painting in school too, right?

D.O. No. I took an art history course before I joined the Marines which reminded me that there were actually people who painted. When I got out I went back to school with a purpose.

R.S. Doing what?

D.O. Studying art, painting. I went to a small college, Bethel in St. Paul, where I had gone before the Marines to play football. Then I established my residency in Minnesota and went to the University of Minnesota.

A.S. Were you always an abstract painter?

D.O. Well, basically. I did take classes where you had to do other things — still life, figure drawing. There were one or two Life magazines that came out about then — I still have them I think. The Big Three were in there — Still, Pollock and Rothko. And there was a rush on Franz Kline in those times. He came across loud and clear in the black and white of the magazines, because they were black and white paintings.

A.S. What did your dad think about your paintings?

D.O. I don't think he was actually opposed to it but he didn't understand it either. He wanted me to stay on the farm. We — the boys in the family — had the northwest room in the house. His idea was that we could fix up that northwest room because it had good light and I could work there. Well, I don't know when the hell I would've worked — fifteen seconds a day? So I sort of rejected that idea. Then later, he had a heart attack so I went back to Iowa to work the farm. I painted a mural on the wall of the barn, green and white – the dark green was the closest I could get to black. It was — I'm guessing — about 30 by 40 feet. I have a photo of it somewhere. I was stuck there, with really nothing to do. My father was in the hospital, I couldn't really leave for a while. I guess that's what it was — I got mad and I had to do something. I took the photo

up to the hospital, and my father said, I guess that's the way you should paint a barn.

My parents never referred to me as a painter, they called me a teacher. If people out there would ask me what I did, I would say I was a painter and my mother would say, You're a teacher!

When I returned to college after the Marines I left under very bad circumstances — I walked out of the door and got in the car and drove away. Later when my father was back in the hospital again, he said — which was sort of biblical — he said, Well, I guess each man has his own calling. And so that was forgiveness on his part.

R.S. The rural environment that you grew up in, do you still have a strong sense of that? Can you conjure up those images?

D.O. I can certainly conjure them up, yeah, in the right frame of mind — some beautiful vistas. Depending on the time of year, expanse of the sky, Mars sitting up there red as could be.

R.S. Tell us about the circumstances of leaving college and coming to New York.

D.O. There was a painter, Peter Busa. He came out to the University just as I was leaving. I was in an exhibition at the Minneapolis Institute of art called The Minnesota Biennial that had been curated by Hilton Kramer. Pete Busa saw my painting and said, why don't you come and be in my class next term? And I said, I can't, I'm leaving, and he said where are you going? and I said I'm going to graduate school, and he said, in my day we didn't go to school, we got to work. Which came back to haunt me later, or rather help me.

Pete came down to my studio to see my paintings. He said, so where are you going to graduate school? and I said I was going to Berkeley. I had been stationed there, and I thought it was really nice. And Pete said, don't go to San Francisco, that's the end of the road, you'll get nothing done. He said if you want to learn something, go to New York. So I said, well I don't know anything about schools in New York, and he said, go to Hunter College. Bob Motherwell's there and I think you'll like him. So in a couple days or so, I packed up and came to New York, I packed a bag and a blanket and the airfare was 39 dollars, it was one of those flights they carried mail on, so it was unheated and I caught cold, but I got here.

R.S. The year was . . . ?

D.O. The end of '61. I stayed in the Marboro Hotel on 8th Street for one night. I went to a place called D. D. Stein where you could rent apartments and paid a month's rent, a month's security and a month

to D. D. Stein, so I was pretty much wiped out almost immediately, but I got a place on Avenue D and 7th, which was a nice neighborhood then.

A.S. Did you go to Hunter to seek out Robert Motherwell?

D.O. Well, Bob was not teaching then, he had taken a year off. I went in and up to the 16th floor and I had my portfolio, and I said I wanted to enroll in the program. This guy Harry Stinson, a sculptor, was the Graduate Adviser and he said, well it's too late for that, but if you want to be a non-matriculant we have a new teacher who is just starting — Tony Smith — you can enroll with him. So I signed up and took the class that Spring.

The first night Tony went around the room asking everybody what they did. One guy was the director of the Hudson River Museum and others ran art departments in high schools, so I just hung back — I didn't know what to say. I was the last person, and finally he said, what do you do? And I said: well I guess I don't do anything. He said, well, why are you here? And I said, I'm a painter. He said, oh, so you're a painter, well I never heard of you. After the class he said, I'm driving downtown on my way back to Jersey, I'll give you a ride if you want. I said fine, and he said, but first I have to stop by 79th street and talk to Lee Krasner for a little bit. Is that OK? I said OK.

A.S. Did you talk to Lee Krasner too?

D.O. Oh sure. We spent quite a long time there, actually. I can't remember what the actual conversation was about. I don't know if it was about her work or Pollock's work. I was kind of flattered to be there.

A.S. So when did Tony Smith first see your work?

D.O. We were supposed to bring some work in to class. He thought it was way too French. It was a somewhat rectilinear painting, done with a knife. It had a lot of paint on it, and he brought up Nicolas de Staël, and I think that's part of why he said it looked French. But I cleaned up my act soon enough.

H. B. Did you continue to be Smith's student?

D.O. By the end of the term I was pretty down and out and I went up to Hartford to work in construction that summer. My father was ill, so that was one of the times I had to go back to Iowa. I came back to the city basically broke again. I was standing in line in September to sign up for a class, and then I realized I didn't

have any money. And Pete Busa came back in my head: "In my day we didn't go to school — we got to work." So I left and got the train back downtown and that was the end of my graduate school career.

R.S. But your connection with Hunter continued. How did that come about?

D.O. I had a friend in Tony's class and she ran into him in the hall, and he asked where I was, and she said I was humbling down in the Lower East Side. And he said, well if he ever needs some work, I've got some things out in South Orange that could be taken care of. I started to work for him fairly regularly, a day or two a week — it was 20 dollars a day — but that's how I got back in, through that.

M. B. It was through Smith that you met Barnett Newman. How did that happen?

D.O. Tony was going with his family to California for the summer. So he loaned me his Volkswagen — it was an old one — and I went down with [Robert] Huot and a couple of other people to the Maryland shore, on Chesapeake Bay. We rented a house there, but nobody stayed but me. I stayed there pretty much alone the entire summer. I did a bunch of paintings down there and when I came back I took a loft on Prince Street. By that time I was working at Nèti Art Color Company so I had a little more money but not much. So I stretched them all up with my first paycheck. Tony said, get some slides taken of them.

I was working down in the cellar at Tony's and Barney Newman came for dinner and Tony brought him down and told me to show him the slides. Barney asked if he could come by the studio and I said, well, of course. Shortly thereafter he came and brought Carroll Janis from the Janis Gallery. This was a time when things were just starting to get rolling. I mean, you could go to 57th Street on a Tuesday night and see every damn artist you wanted to see in the whole city. Unlike today where you go to 200 galleries. Then there were about four or five galleries you went to for openings and that was it.

H.B. What kind of connection did you have with Newman? Did you ever talk about the way you paint?

D.O. Oh sure, a lot. But he didn't function as a teacher, he was actually opposed to that. I guess he was the best kind of critic — he was engaged, encouraging. He wanted me to be the same with him.

M.B. How did you get started teaching?

D.O. Gene Goossen [then Chairman of the Art Department at Hunter] had heard about me and Tony brought him down to Fanelli's Bar. We had a drink and Tony said Gene is going to come up and see the paintings,

which he did. Gene said to call him and I did, and he said I've got a couple hours [teaching] for you. But he said, don't quit your other job. He also said, I'm not really sure if you're verbal enough to be a teacher. I said, what do you mean — I don't talk *all* the time? He forgave me that. Anyway, as it turned out, by the time I got there, in early February, I pretty much had at once a full schedule. So I just stayed on.

M. B. What about your first show?

D.O. In the spring of '64 Barney Newman said take your slides to Janis Gallery, there's a show in the formal tradition. I did, but it was too late: the catalogue had already gone to press. Barney said, you'd think that if I said something they'd listen to me, wouldn't you? Anyway, the director of Fischbach heard that Barney had supported me and came out and said, I'd like to see those paintings sometime. I said, your place is really too small for me to show. He said, well, can I call you? And I said, I don't have a telephone.

I was just stupid and naive. I told Tony about this, and he said, show as much as you possibly can. Show in Woolworth's window if you have to! Don't do what Barney and I did, which is let it go so long it becomes too important to you. Just show all the time, every chance you get, and it won't mean so much. I can't remember exactly what happened, but finally Marilyn Fischbach came down and offered me a show in Fall of '64.

That same Fall it turned out that Gene [Goossen] was setting up a show of his own called Eight Young Artists at the Hudson River School Museum. I had shown a couple works at Fishbach in the spring. So that played into Tony's idea that you should show as much as possible, and he kept saying to me, I'm really glad that Gene's having this show, because now your other show won't be such a big deal. It makes sense.

J.M. But your show at Fischbach, your first one man show, was a big deal. Do you look back on that as the beginning of something for you?

D.O. There was a time I remember in the early 70s when somebody, a student, said, "Gee, people can really make a living doing painting now." And I thought, where on earth did you get an idea like that? I mean I grew up reading about Cezanne and Van Gogh. I didn't have any expectations. I knew how old DeKooning was before he showed and how old Newman was before he showed. When they asked me about a show I thought, I'm too young, I'm not ready to have a show. This was before I was disabused by Smith. I figured you worked, and then when you're fifty or so, you get to show some work. There are a lot of artists who have done that. They didn't have any expectation of using paintings to have a show, to sell them and make a living doing it. I never had those expectations either.

M.B. By the time there was that MoMA show that Goossen curated [The Art of the Real, 1969] with a lot of Hunter people in it — the one that traveled to London and Paris — did you guys feel like you were at the epi-center of what was really new and exciting in painting?

D.O. Well, if that was the case, it went south very quickly.

M.B. I remember Sandy Wurmfeld lamenting that too. He said, we were all in this show and we thought we were all going to have MoMA retrospectives in a couple of years, and then it just kind of changed. What happened?

D.O. The economy went to hell, that's one thing, and there was the usual up and down cycle where realist painting came in strong, which the art writers grabbed onto like crazy because there was something to write about all of a sudden. And conceptual art was in there too, kind of cutting out the object per se, the paintings and sculpture. So there were all those factors.

A.S. How do you feel about the various digressions in the art world that you've observed throughout your career? What do you think the sustainability of painting is?

D.O. I don't know if I can answer that question. I can't imagine a continuing fascination with manufactured images or things that constantly move. I think of a great Goya, some captured image like that with pizzazz and grace, and I can't imagine why that wouldn't remain appealing.

J.M. Let's talk about your paintings. Do you have any influences from music or poetry?

D.O. No. People have mentioned music before in relation to my work but I don't have any direct conscious contact with it. I don't really listen to music. There's a couple things that I like to listen to on occasion. I don't think they feed in to what I do at all. And the same with poetry — I steal titles and I enjoy poetry, but I don't see any direct relation to it.

R.S. What about how you title your work? You title everything. Why didn't you choose to identify your works the way others in your generation have: Number 1, Series 1, titles like that?

D.O. I like titles a lot. But that's not even why I use them. Do you know where Pollock's Autumn Rhythm is?

R.S. Yes.

D.O. Do you know where Number 32 is?

R.S. (laughs) Point taken.

D.O. But I like that the title is a moniker — it identifies something. I know Blue Poles is in Australia, Autumn Rhythm is at the Met, Number 32, Dusseldorf. And where I get the titles, it just depends on what the time was.

H.B. Could you tell us about the Lost Twin [1996] paintings?

D.O. I read an article in The New Yorker about two studies — one was in Sweden and one at the University of Minnesota — on twins. It was found that there were more twins conceived but not born than was previously known. In the majority of cases, only one survives in the womb. They found out that the one who did survive often bears a psychological trauma from that survival, as if they were missing something. It was a pretty interesting article.

H.B. So your titles come after your paintings?

D.O. I can't remember a time when they didn't.

H.B. When you did Fall 2001, did you have a concept of "fall" when you were painting it?

D.O. No, not at all. What happened was I was stretching that painting the morning of September 11th, and had the radio on and heard what was starting to happen. A normal thought, I guess, would have been to call the painting "September 11th." But then by the time it had gone through all the permutations of "9/11," "September Eleven," "Attack on America." I thought, this is a totally banal title now. Then, my old assistant, Clinton Storm in Germany, wanted to see some slides and when I sent them I didn't have titles, so I just wrote the dates on. He wrote back and said, those are great titles. Fall 2001 makes sense. In a way, it was a fall. I don't have to pin it down to the day I started the painting.

H.B. We were talking about the twin towers, and thinking that the viewer can't help seeing the twin towers in your forms. How would you respond to that?

D.O. I wouldn't. It would be their problem, not mine, because they're not there. Once, because I was reading James Fraser's The Golden Bough, I was using titles from mythology. Another time, when I took the subway, the lettering on the floor was supposed to say "STAND CLEAR" but the only thing left was STAN CLE — "stancle" — it doesn't make sense at all, but that's what was left there, the rest had rubbed off. I used it. I like the idea of a kind of residue, a surrealist way where you can sort of get an idea, but you don't quite get it. I take titles from anywhere. So there might be something there, but no twin towers.

M.B. Do you have mystical feelings about the paintings or is it for you more literal: what you see is what you see?

D.O. Well, Second Wind [1982] is 23 feet long. There were two separate canvases that joined, so they're each 11 1/2 feet long. And for whatever reason, the left hand side was working pretty well, but the right hand side — well, I think the right hand side is still in the closet there. I got mad and I stretched another 11 1/2 feet one and put it up and started to work on it. It wasn't going so well either, so I got mad again and I took a big trowel with a lot of black paint and just made a slash across the right hand side. And somehow it pulled the whole thing together. Because I'd given up and started again with the second canvas, I called it Second Wind. So it's literal.

H.B. How about the small studies? You have so many of them, how do they relate to your large paintings?

D.O. To some degree. I think of them as studio detritus. I test colors that way. I try not to think of them as sacrosanct or precious. That doesn't mean that if they work out I go on and make a painting from one of them. It always works the other way around. They work together with the bigger painting.

You know what I mean about not letting them be precious. I'm a great fan of very small paintings, though. I saw those small late Manets in a show in Paris last year. But the first small Manet I saw was quite a long time ago, a slice of watermelon in the Philadelphia Museum. And Morandi . . . ! I love all those small paintings. Morandi I've known for a while. There was a Morandi show in Pietrasanta last summer. Incredible, over a dozen of them. I went to the show several times.

J.M. Are other artists important to you? Matisse?

D.O. Matisse is a sort of a god, isn't he? Certainly to me he's a very large presence.

J.M. The early work or the later cut-outs?

D.O. For me, the early paintings, up to at least Bathers by a River [The Art Institute of Chicago, 1909-1916]. The

cut-outs, they should give an older artist a kick — not a kick, but hope. They're livelier, quicker, more joyful. He did them in old age, isn't that refreshing? Do you know the Bathers by the way? Incredibly powerful painting, although I can't figure it out. I don't know how he ever got the guts to do it. That View of Notre-Dame [1914] in the Museum of Modern Art, most of it is just sketchy. I don't know how he was able to quit on it. Maybe he just abandoned it.

R.S. Do you ever have trouble breaking away from your paintings?

D.O. When to stop? Sure, I've wrecked a lot.

R.S. Going too far?

D.O. Or pursuing. I think if you have pre-set notions, you're probably in trouble. If you already have your mind pre-set, what you're going to do as opposed to what you've done, you could get in trouble. You should be able to stop anytime you want to. Anytime — fifteen minutes, fifteen hours, fifteen days, anytime.

Ray Parker and Esteban Vicente came by the studio one day to have a glass of wine and look at paintings. There was this big painting on the wall and Esteban was very taken with it and I said, well, I'm gonna work more on it, and he said, you're nuts. . . . Well, it's here somewhere, face down (gestures to discarded canvases lining studio floor).

R.S. You did work on it.

D.O. I wrecked it!

A.S. What do you think the difference is between the vertical and the horizontal format in your work. Some people suggest that the horizontal is blatantly landscape, and vertical implies figuration. Do you think those kind of analogies have any bearing on your work?

D.O. I think it makes absolute sense, but I don't think it applies to me in the least. I can think of three terms that the French use. One is a marine, which is this kind of shape (gestures horizontally), one is almost the same shape but vertical, which implies the figure. What I'm trying to get at is that this goes back so long, that it's a classical concept. It's embodied in the stretcher. The vertical is more expressionistic, and the horizontal is more passive. I did grow up looking at the elongated rectangle of a photograph of the midnight sun, which I thought my aunt took. We had it over the couch, and I was fascinated by it.

H.B. When you pick these very long horizontal canvases, do you have landscape in mind?

D.O. No. But, writers do. Goossen talks about that: "He comes from a landscape area."

A.S. People can see the long horizontal as a landscape reference, especially given where you're from, but then because you're putting those verticals in there, it seems like you're dispelling that landscape reference.

D.O. I don't know, it just comes out of the way I've worked. I stopped using the vertical bars at one point, because I didn't want it to be . . . didn't want it to look designed. I just wanted it to be about as dumb as it could be.

H.B. So you don't want your paintings to look consciously balanced?

D.O. No, uh-uh. I like to throw in a little wrench.

H.B. That reminds me of the American's anti-balance versus the harmony of European artists. The minimalists were against that kind of balance.

D.O. Well, I don't really want to be anti-European.

A.S. Minimalists, like Judd in the way he described Barnett Newman's paintings, really relished how they set themselves up against the Europeans, because European painting is so much about illusion and American painting at that time was completely anti-illusion. But you don't seem to jump on that train at all. I mean your work is anti-illusion in one way, but then in another sense it's not.

D.O. Any time you put two colors together there's going to be some kind of illusion. It's pretty hard to avoid. A lot of those minimalist paintings you might be talking about are pretty flat, one-color paintings. Now the other part about the Parisian thing is that the painting is made to look good. If you compare a Pierre Soulages and a Franz Kline you know what I'm talking about. The Soulages's are beautiful like frosting on a cake, but Kline has a totally different feeling.

J.M. How would you explain the relationship between the older hard-edged work, like Four [1966], and the recent Fall 2001.

D.O. It's back to what I was saying a while ago about how I always liked the idea of being able to stop when I wanted to. In some of those earlier paintings, you really had to follow through. Four wouldn't be as strong if it were sort of brushy in some parts. I had to follow through with it to the conclusion of the concept. Whereas Fall 2001 is closer to something where I can stop any time I want to and not have to follow through.

It's trying not to have the painting be a slice of life, or yard goods. You can't just roll it out and cut it off wherever you want, or stretch it out. Also, yeah, I like the breath that comes from "memories." I like those memories.

H.B. How do your summers in Italy affect your painting? Did you change your colors?

D.O. Yeah, a bit. A lot of the color over there, I don't know how to put it on yet. I only know how to take it off. I had a whole wall of canvases in my studio over there and I had almost all the colors of the walls of Pietrasanta on those canvases. But I had to put on the pigment and rub it down with cloth and alcohol to get the colors. Because the sun hits it and the rain hits it, you get the color by rubbing it off. This (pointing to Contra Bass) would be fairly close to one of the colors on the walls over there.

R.S. These three paintings [Fall 2001, Winter Light and Contra Bass] were all done this year, here in your New York studio. Do they still carry the imprint, the memory, of Pietrasanta?

D.O. Oh yes.

H.B. Have you seen any painting in Italy that influenced you?

D.O. I made a trip there in the early 80s specifically to look at Caravaggio and Piero Della Francesca. And then I went back later and did a little bit more, but not enough.

A.S. Were you combining that black and yellow before you went to look at the Caravaggios?

D.O. I'm not sure. Honestly, I don't remember. I'm my own warehouse-man, my own shipper, my own art packer. I don't want to be my own art historian. I really don't care. I had a great time looking at the Caravaggios and the Pieros.

Once when Tony Smith and Pollock were driving out to Springs on Long Island, Pollock said to Tony, you look at every building we pass. Tony said, yes, yes I do. Pollock said, I'm that way about painting too. So I think I look at everything to do with painting. And, I steal what I can.

J.M. Your colors are very different from other abstract painters — the colors are really your own. How do you choose them? Where's that palette from?

D.O. How are they different?

J.M. Well, they're not based on Albers. I don't see Mondrian. You take a green and put it right next to orange — it's slightly off from what I've seen in other paintings.

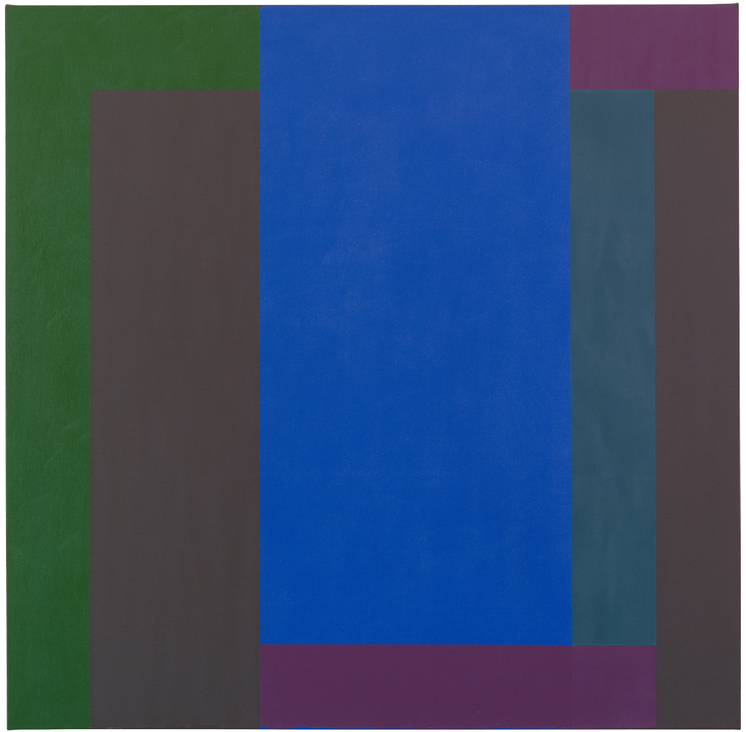
D.O. I'm not really sure (stands up, goes over to Contra Bass). This color is a pthalocyanine I used in Roussillon [1997] in a totally different way, and I thought I would try and use it again here. So that set that up. This one — what would you call it wine? maroon? — I thought it would talk to that color, and I hadn't used it before in that way, so I tried it out. You notice that this bar right here has no relationship to anything else, except as modified color. So I took that idea, which I like because it seems out of place, and used it over there (points to Buff, 2002). Something that could be thought of as a mistake I purposely introduced into the next painting.

One time, when I was in school, I had a canvas that was basically all on the warm side, and my teacher was saying I should introduce some cooler color. And I said, why? I remember he said, well, that's the way of nature, that's the way we see things.

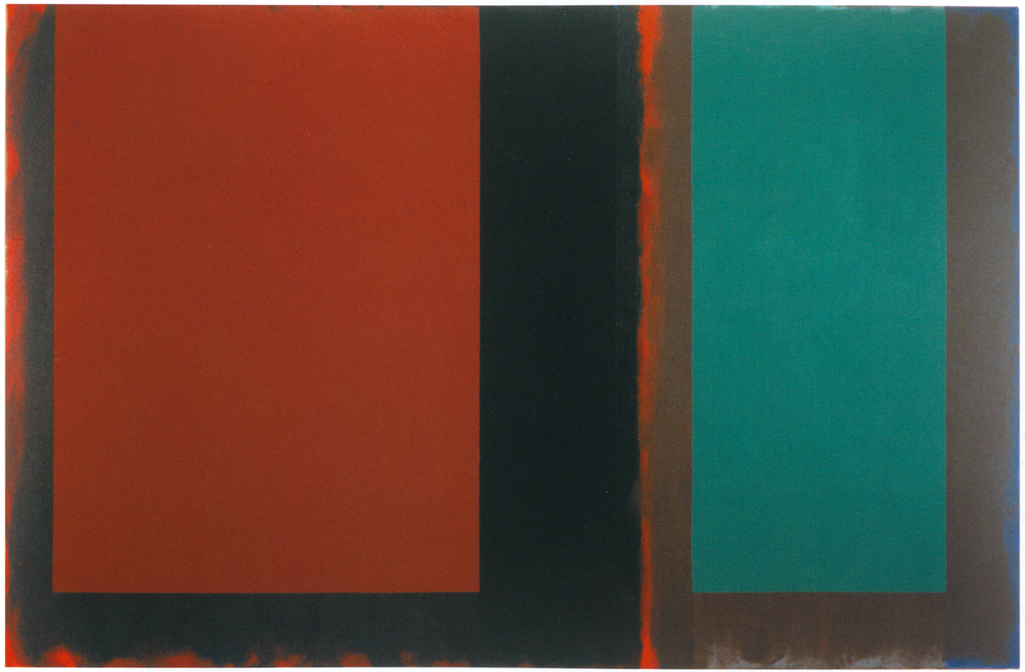
My palette is really pretty simple, it's warm, cool, and value adjustment. For a color theory that's not a lot, but it's what I've got.

Color Plates

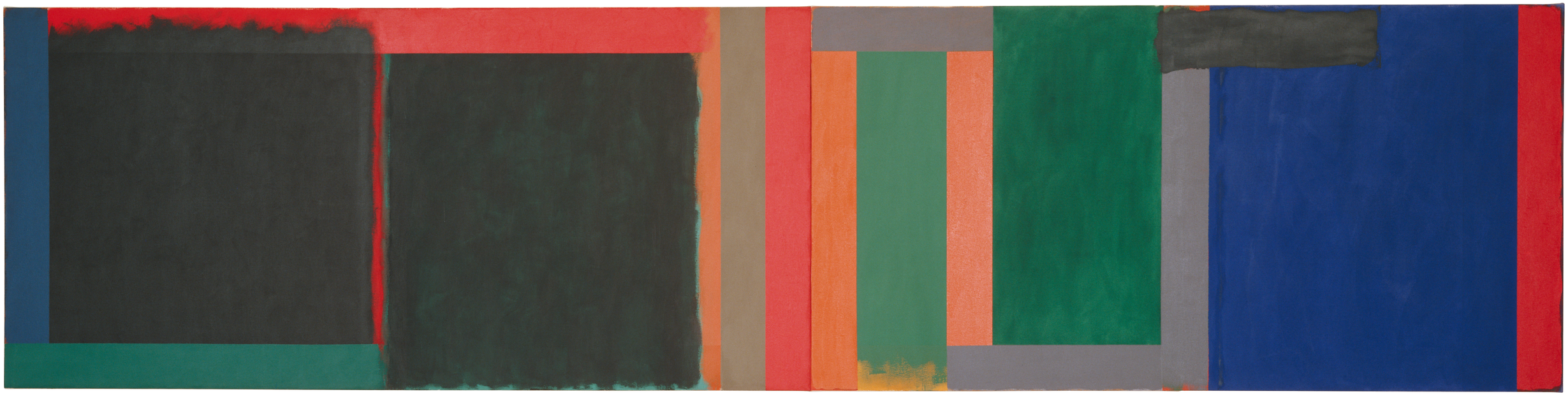
Unless otherwise noted, all works are Collection of the Artist.



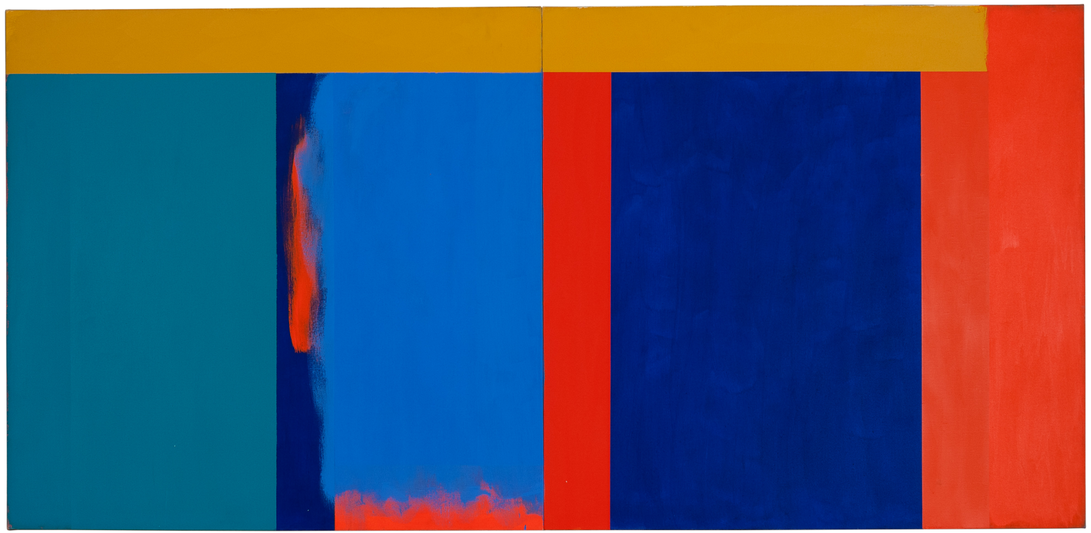
Middle Zone, 1981-82. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 64 x 65 inches. Collection Whitney Museum of American Art.



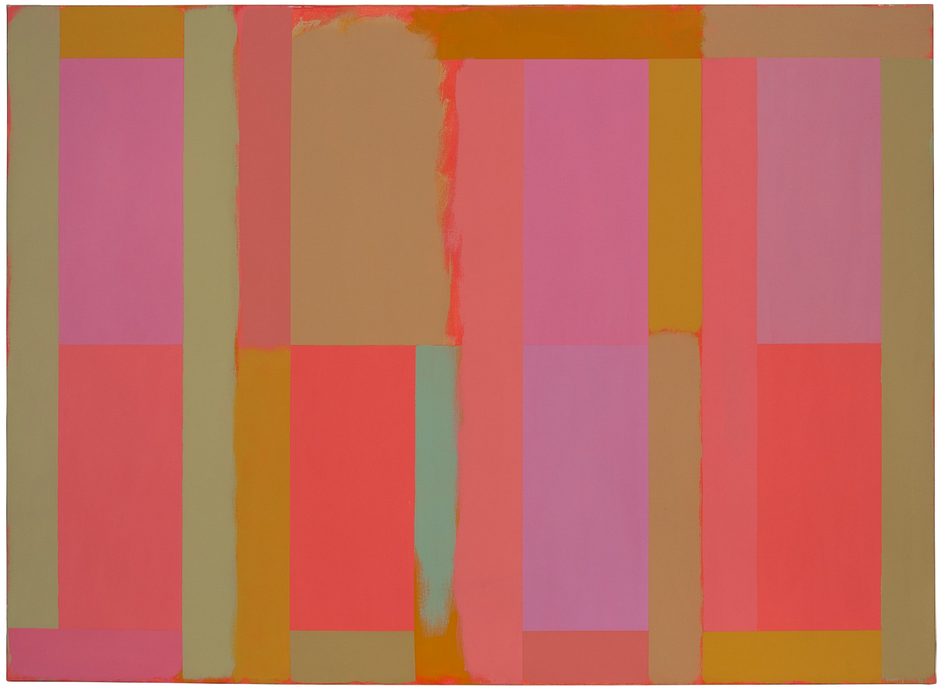
Pilar, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 104 inches.



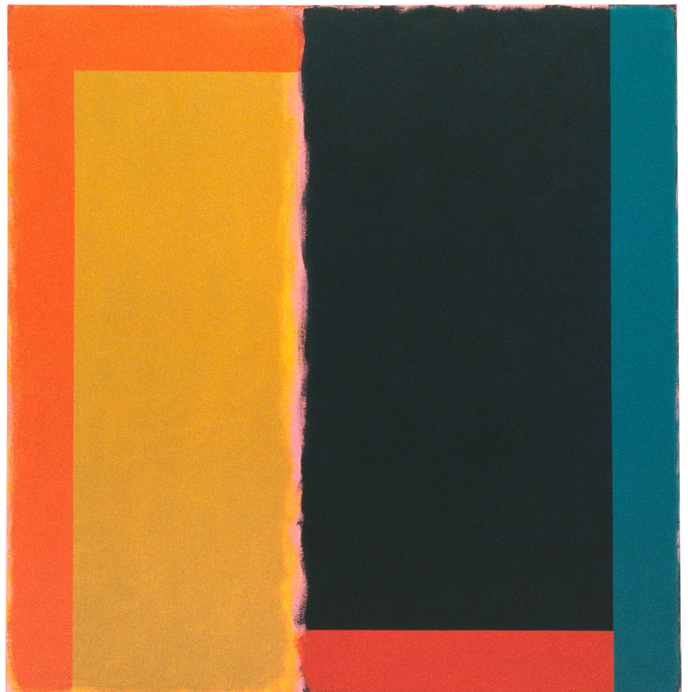
Second Wind. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 68 x 276 inches. Collection IBM, Somers, New York.



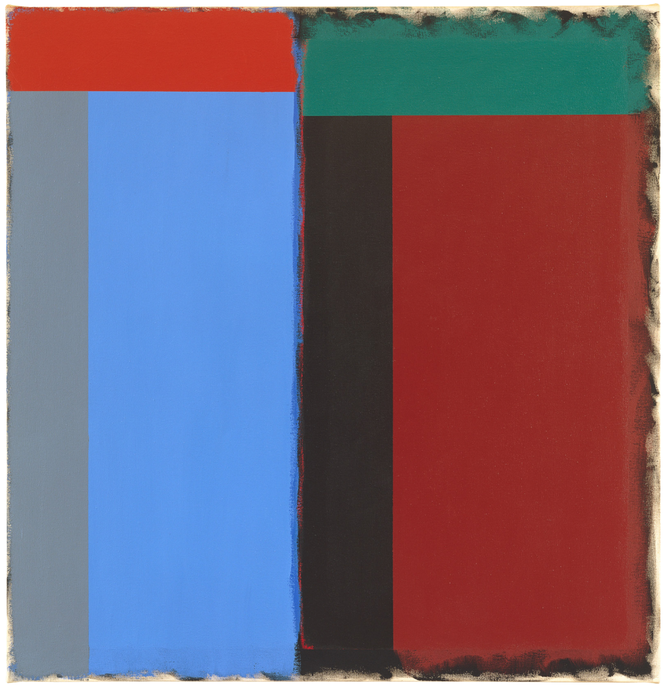
Toucan, 1982. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 124 inches.



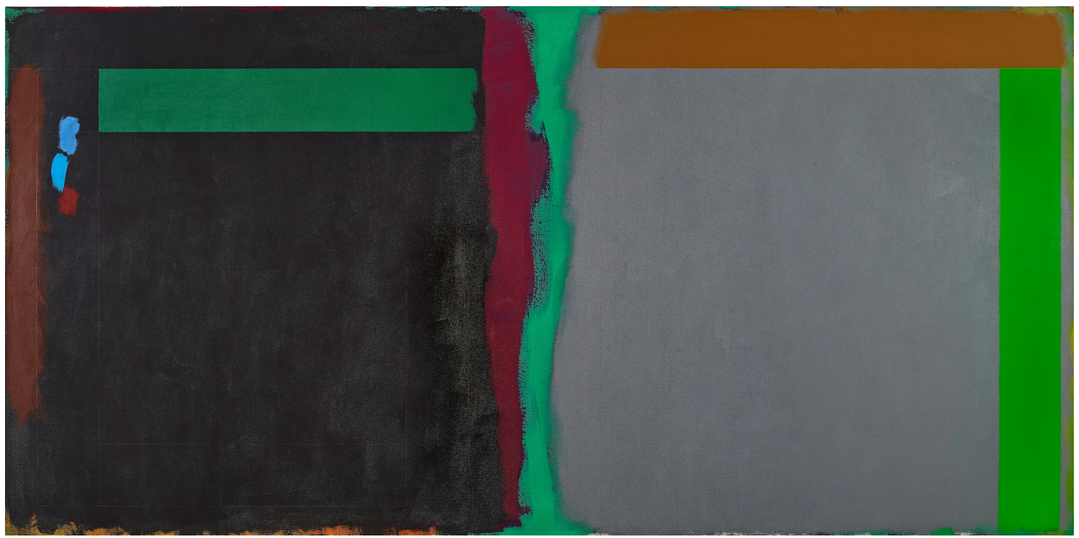
Harlequin, 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 104 inches.



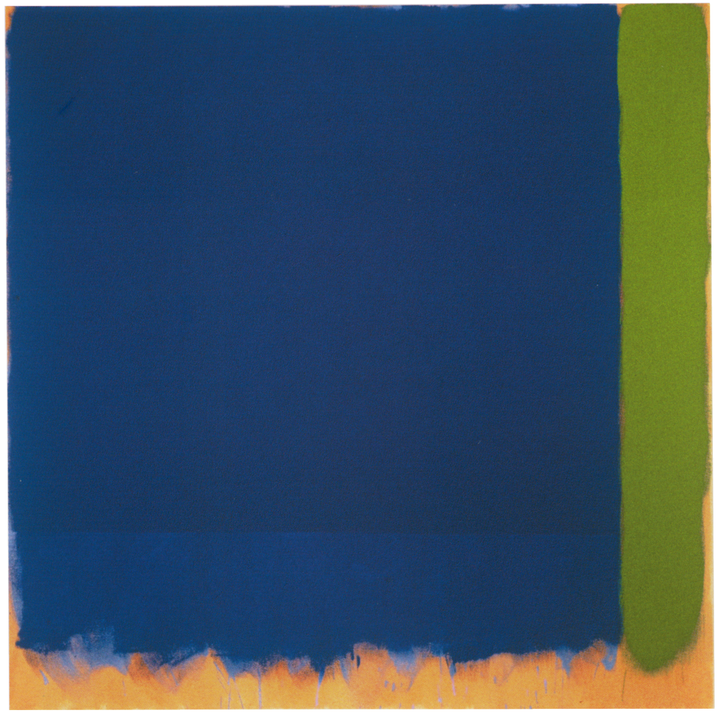
Gilt, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 62 x 60 inches. Collection Rochelle and Larry Sullivan.



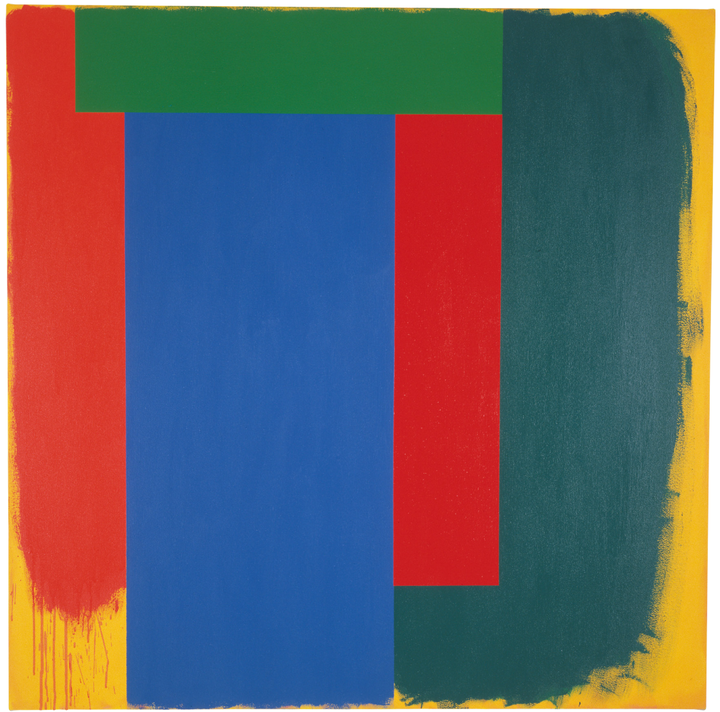
Stem, 1984. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 62 x 60 inches.



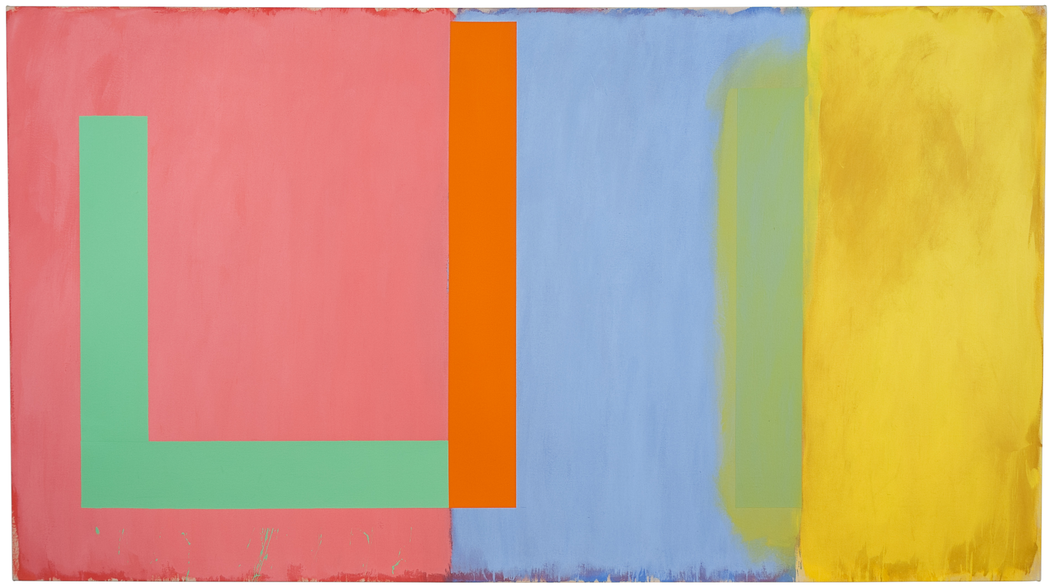
Night Shade, 1984. Acrylic on canvas, 68 x 138 inches.



Blue Moon, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches.

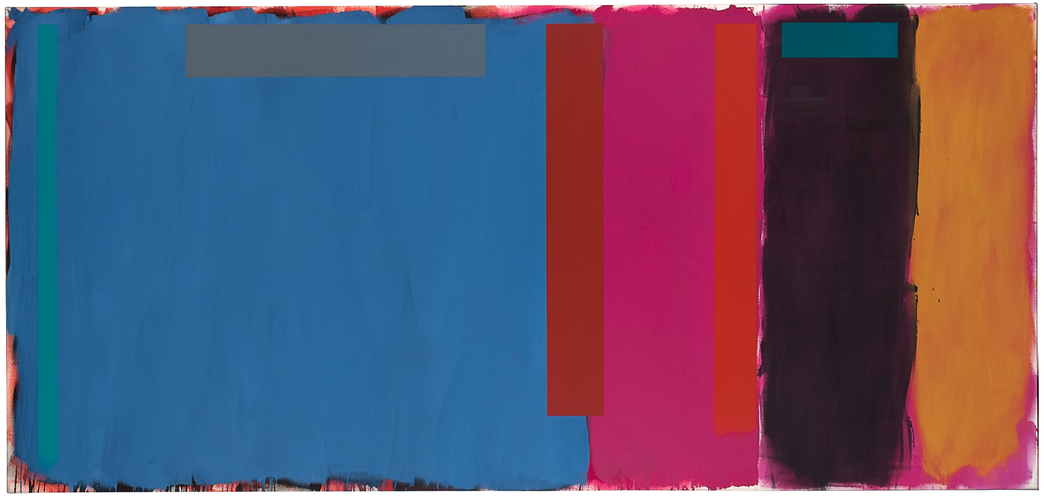


Marker/Regatta, 1986. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 60 inches. Private Collection.

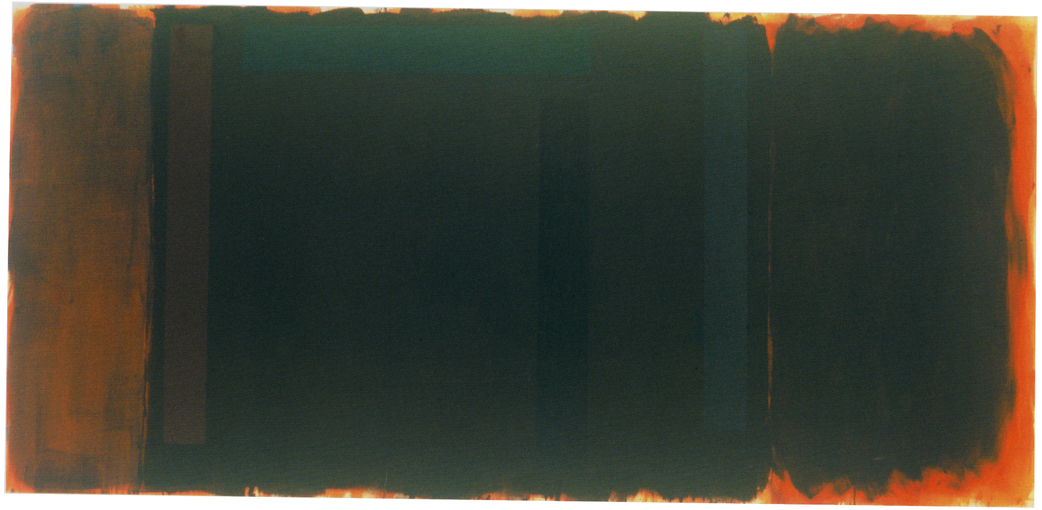


Bridgehampton, 1987-88. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 x 108 inches. Collection of Susan Caldwell.

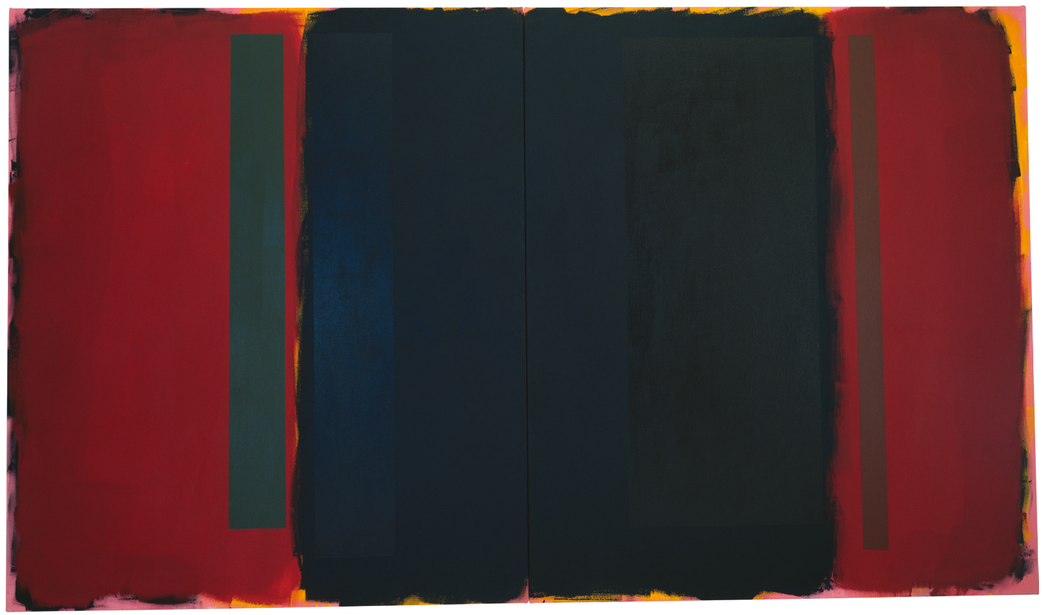
Med, 1989. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 78 inches.



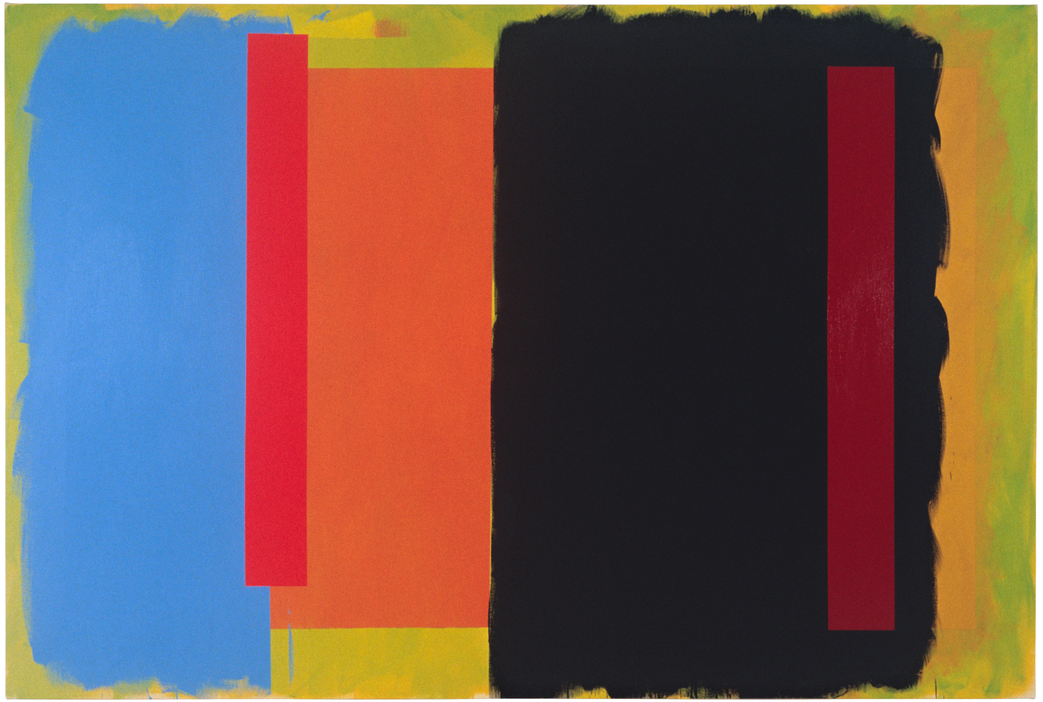
Spirit Lake, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 140 inches.



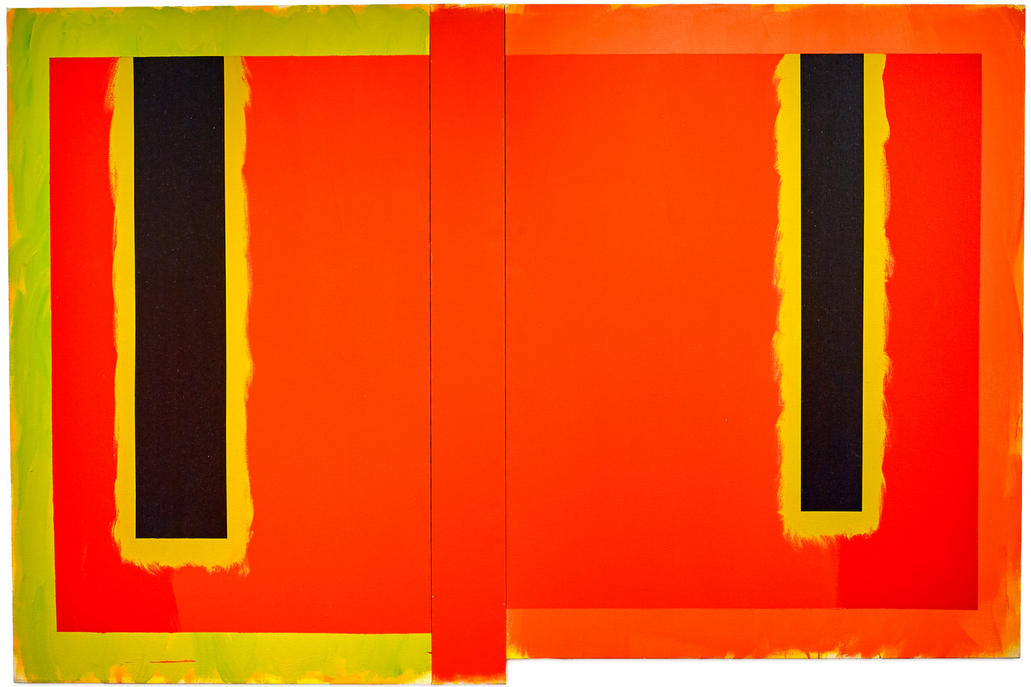
Night Wing, 1990. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 138 inches.



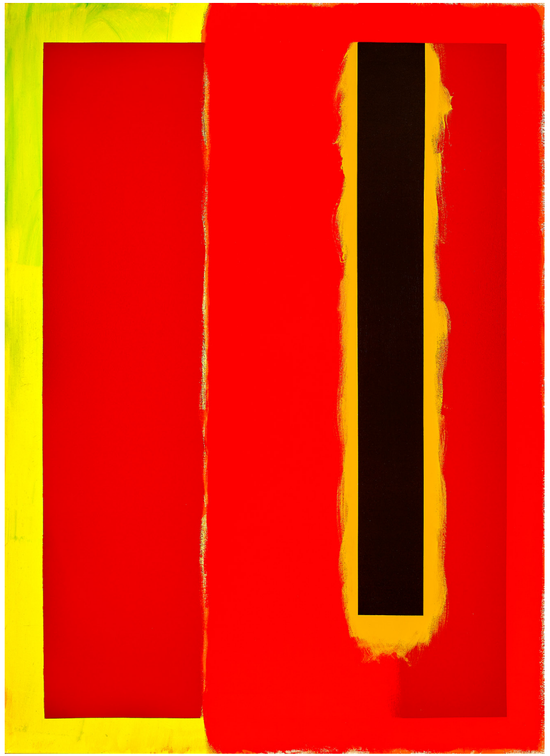
Brothers, 1992. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 134 inches.



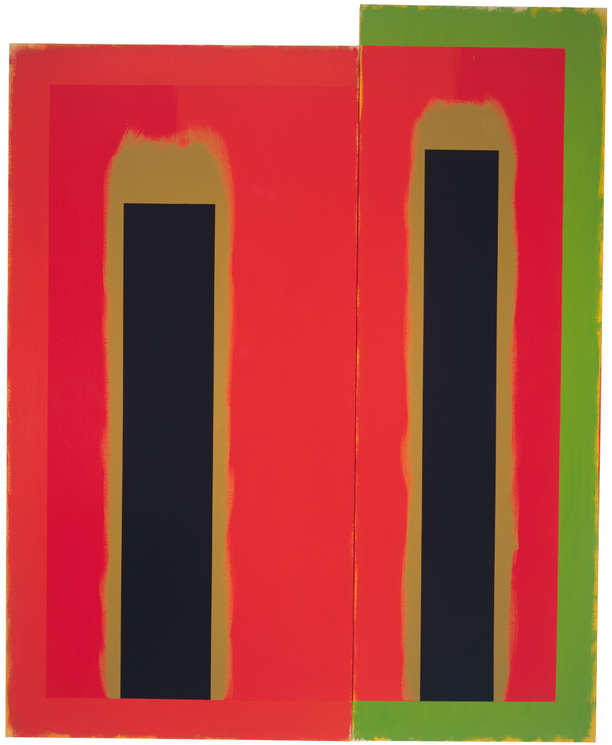
Peep Show, 1983. Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 114 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Michael D. McCarthy.



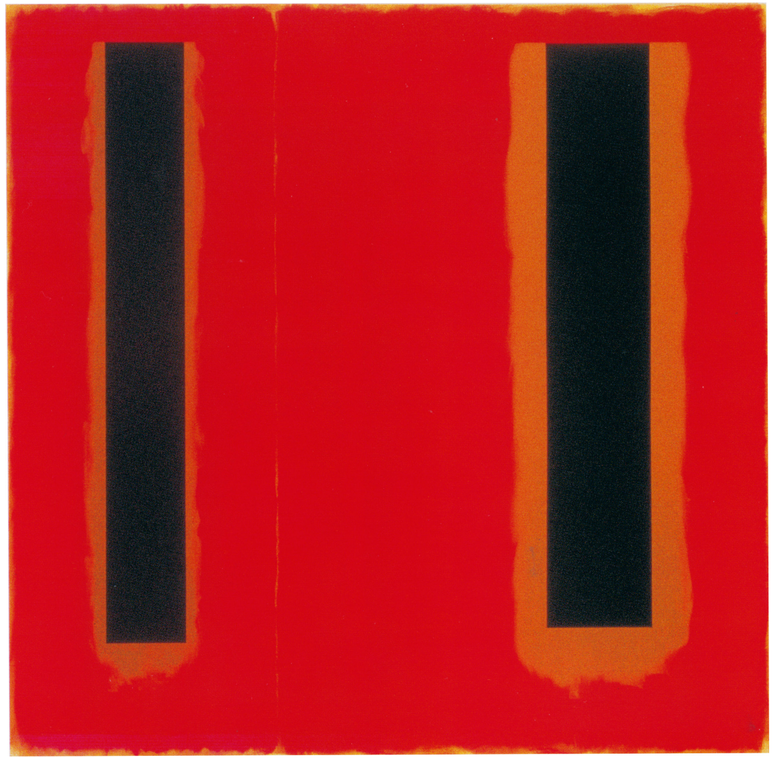
Cat Eyes, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 110 inches.



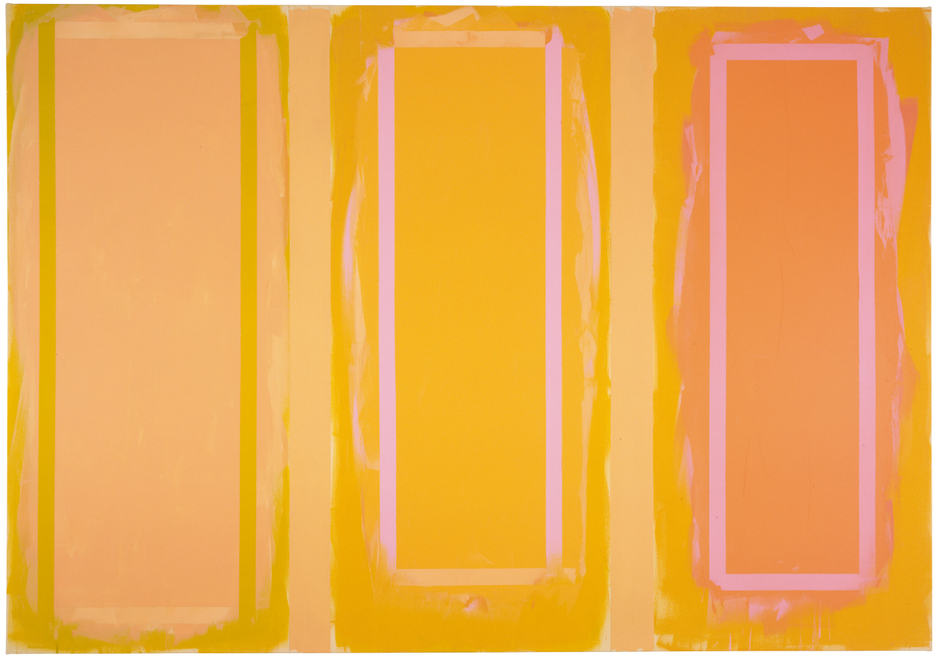
M'Aidez, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 56 inches.



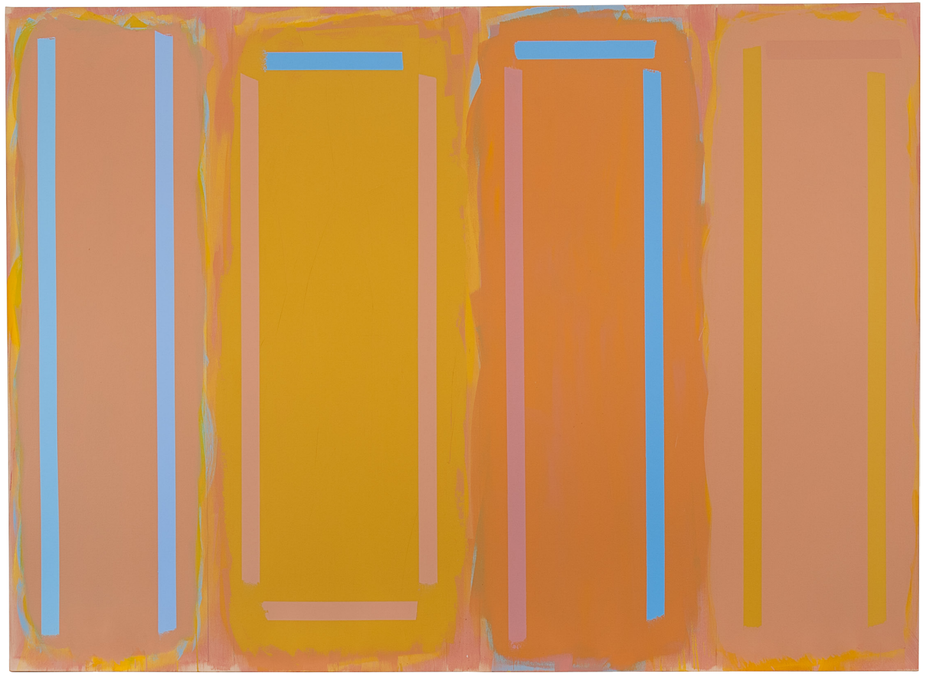
Black Cat, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 58 inches. Collection Tammy Keller and Jeffrey Goldenstein.



Cad Med, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 77 inches.

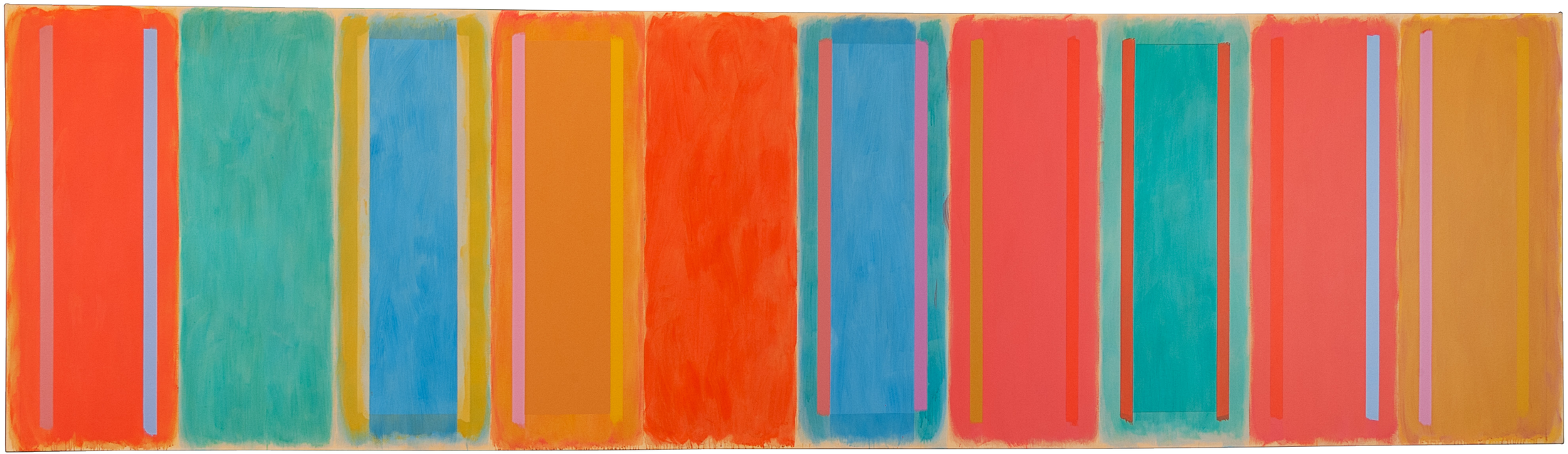


Way of All Flesh. Acrylic on canvas, 78 x 112 inches. Collection Michele Toohey.

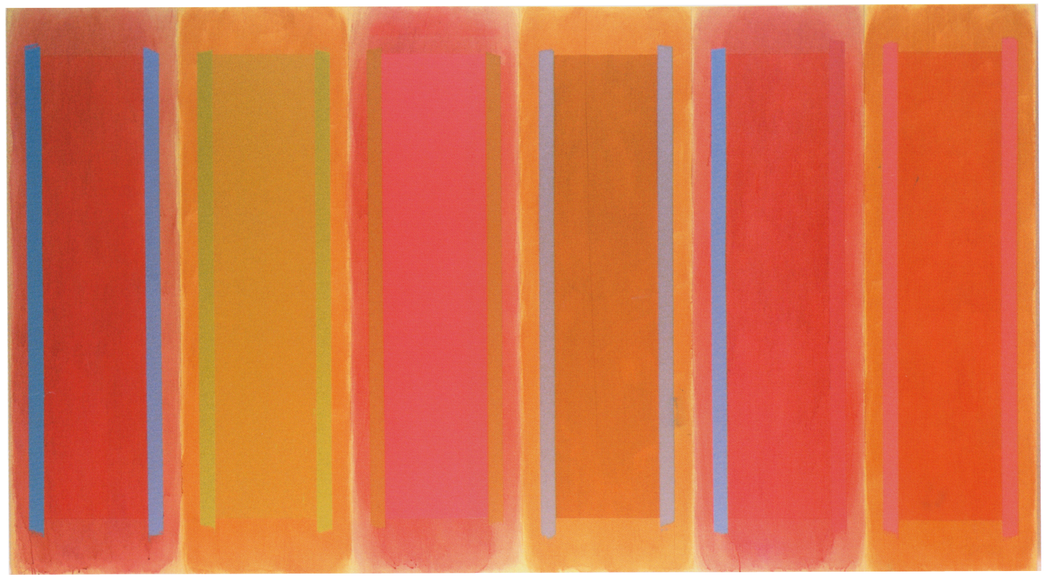


Medley, 1995. Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 104 inches.

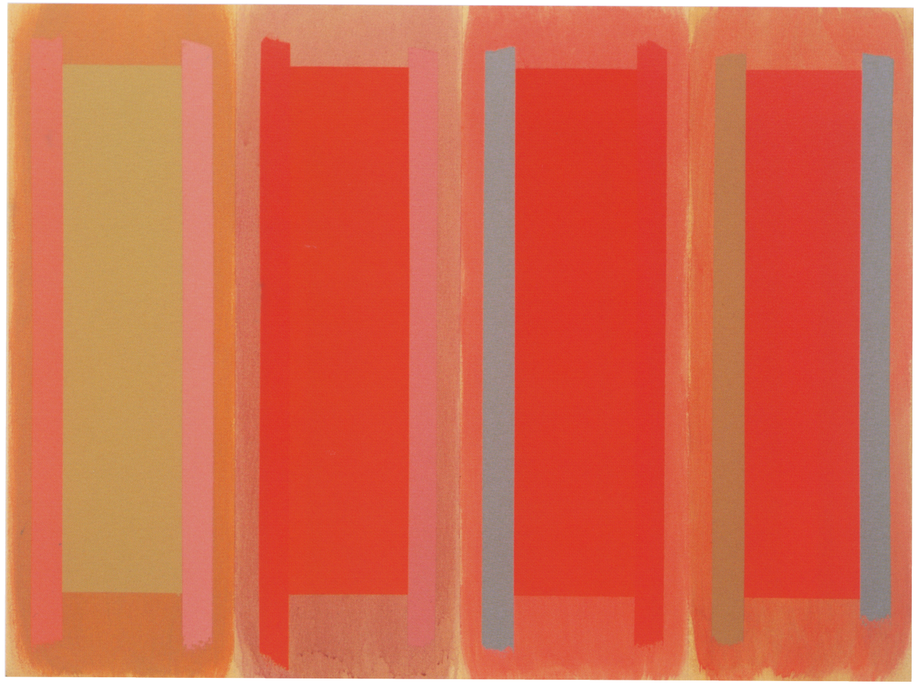
Lost Twin (Diptych), 1996. Acrylic on canvas, 35 x 108 inches. Private Collection.



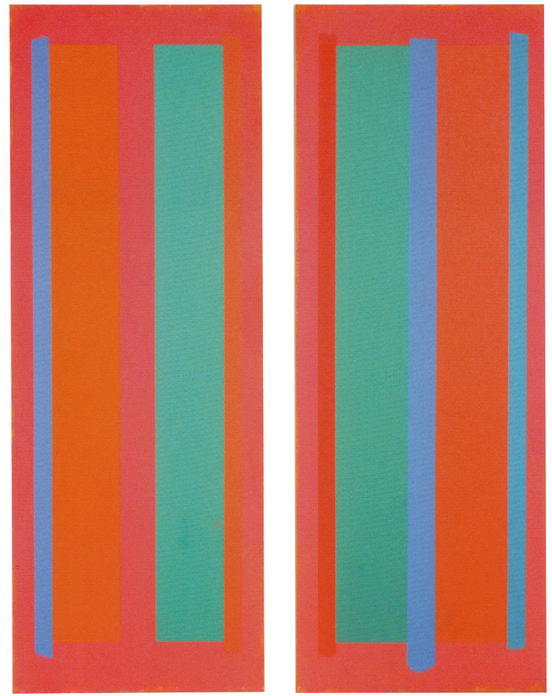
Roussillon, 1997. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 256 inches.



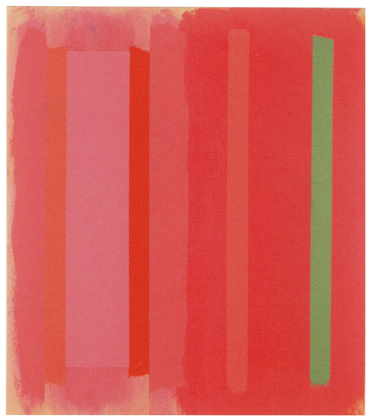
Lavender, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 108 inches.

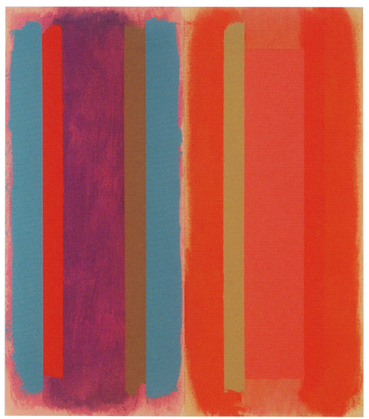


Red Plus, 1988-99. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 inches.

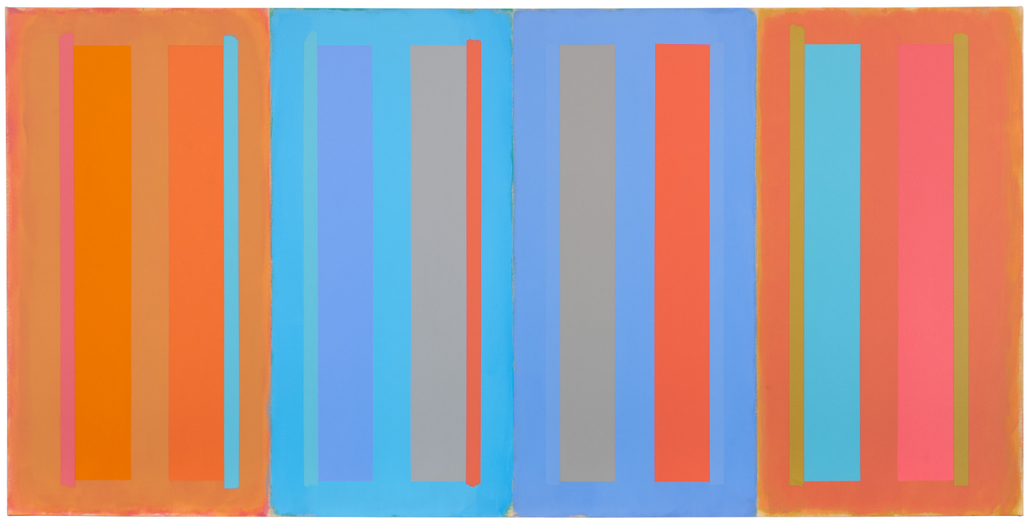


Gateway (2), 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 76 x 28 inches.



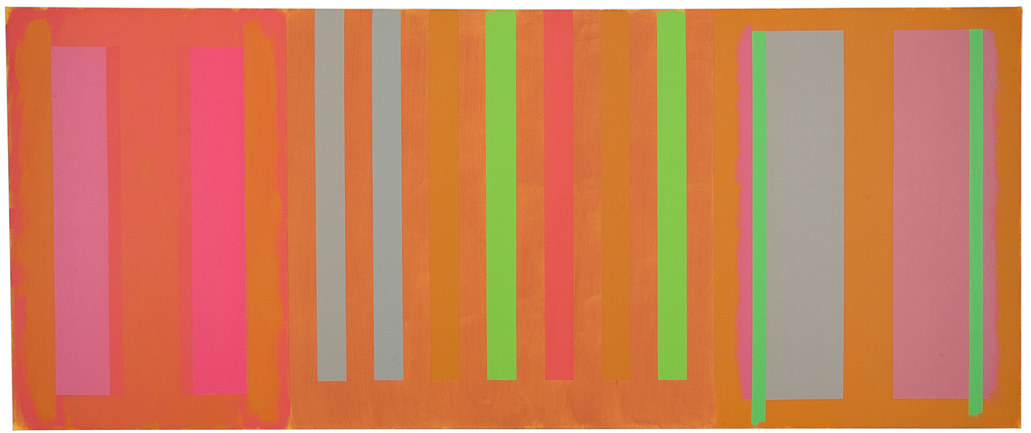


Left: Untitled, 1998-2000. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 28 inches.
Right: Untitled (Split Two), 1988-2000. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 32 x 28 inches.



Ghost Light, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 67 x 134 inches.

Contra Bass, 2001. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 156 inches.



Winter Light, 2001-02. Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 144 inches.

Doug Ohlson

Birth: 18 November 1936; Cherokee, Iowa

Education: University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, B.A., 1961

Solo Exhibitions:

2000 Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1995 Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1993 Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1992 Marsh Gallery, University of Richmond, Va.
1992 Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1990 Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1990 Jaffe Baker Gallery, Boca Raton, Fla.
1989 Ann Jaffe Gallery, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla.
1987 Ruth Siegel Ltd., N.Y.C.
1986 Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.
1986 Galerie 99, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla.
1985 Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.C.
1985 Works on Paper, 1980-1985, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1983 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1982 Two Decades, 1962-1982, Bennington College, Bennington, Vt.
1982 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1981 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1979 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1977 Portland Center for the Visual Arts, Portland, Ore.
1977 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1977 Paintings 1964-77, Nell Gifford Stern, N.Y.C. (exhibition destroyed by fire between the installation and the opening)
1976 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1974 Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.
1972 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1970 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1970 Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.
1969 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1968 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1967 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1966 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.
1964 Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.

Selected Group Exhibitions:

2002 International Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, American Academy of Arts and Letters, N.Y.C.
2000 Transparent, Translucent, Opaque, Galerie Frank, Paris, France
2000 Die Farbe (Rot) Hat Mich, Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, Hagen, Germany
2000 Hunter College Art Department MFA Faculty Exhibition, Times Square Gallery, N.Y.C.
2000 Painting Abstraction, New York Studio School, N.Y.C.
2000 25th Anniversary Exhibition 1974 –1999, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
2000 Deep Field Painting, Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, N.Y.C.
1997 Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, American Academy of Arts and Letters, N.Y.C.
1994 The Exuberant 80's, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1994 Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, American Academy of Arts and Letters, N.Y.C.
1993 Thru Thick and Thin, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1993 Combinations, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1992 Four Abstract Painters, Ann Jaffe Gallery, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla
1992 1 X 7, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1992 Invitational Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture, American Academy of Arts and Letters, N.Y.C.
1992 27th Anniversary Group Exhibition, Ann Jaffe Gallery, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla.
1991 Confluences, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1991 Amerikansk Kunst Efter 1960, Gl. Holtegaard, Copenhagen, Denmark
1991 8 Young Artists, Then (1964) & Now (1991), Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, N.Y.C.
1990 New Yorkers and Outsiders, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1989 25th Anniversary Exhibition, Ann Jaffe Gallery, Bay Harbor Islands, Fla.
1989 Autumn on West Broadway Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1989 Second Anniversary Exhibition, Michael Walls Gallery, N.Y.C.
1989 Small Paintings., Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.
1989 A Debate on Abstraction: The Persistence of Painting, Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, N.Y.C.
1988 20th Anniversary Group Exhibition, Paula Cooper Gallery, N.Y.C.
1988 Four Painters: Doug Ohlson, Frances Barth, Michael Boyd, Elena Bornstein, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1988 More Than Color., Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.
1987 The Christmas Exhibition, Michael Walls Gallery, N.Y.C.
1987 Color Now, 55 Mercer Street, N.Y.C.
1987 Review / Preview, Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.C.
1986 Ten Artists, Ruth Siegel Ltd at The International Contemporary Art Fair, Los Angeles Convention Center, Los Angeles, Calif.
1986 Square and . . ., Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.C.
1986 The Homecoming: An exhibition of work by Iowa-born artists, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, (touring to Des Moines Art Center and other Iowa museums)
1986 Drawings, Nina Freudenheim Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.
1986 Harvest, Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.C.
1985 The Severe and the Romantic: Geometric Humanism in American Painting, the 1950s and the 1980s. Marilyn Pearl Gallery, N.Y.C.
1985 Bilder fur Frankfurt, Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
1984 24 x 24 x 24, An invitational exhibition, Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.C.
1983 Abstract Painting: 1960-69, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Long Island City, N.Y.

1981 Dark Thoughts: Black Paintings, Pratt Manhattan Center Gallery, N.Y.C.; Pratt Institute, Brooklyn

1980 Arte Americana Contemporanea, Civici Musei e Gallerie di Storia e Arte, Udine, Italy

1979 Generation: Twenty Abstract Painters Born In The United States Between 1929 and 1946, Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.

1979 The Implicit Image: Abstraction in the 70's, Nielson Gallery, Boston, Mass.

1979 24 x 24, Max Hutchinson Gallery, N.Y.C.

1979 Transitions I, An Exhibition About the Process of Change, Wallace Gallery, State University of New York at Old Westbury

1979 Kristan Murchison Gallery, Dallas, Tex.

1978 The Geometry of Color, Andre Zarre Gallery, N.Y.C.

1977 Alternatives: Significant painting and sculpture of the 60's, Susan Caldwell, N.Y.C.

1977 Collection In Progress, 200 or so selections from the collection of Milton Brutten and Helen Herrick, Moore College of Art Gallery, Philadelphia, Pa.

1976 Contemporary Paintings: A Review of the New York Gallery Season, 1974-75, Lowe Art Gallery, Syracuse University, Syracuse, N.Y.

1976 Rooms P.S. 1, Institute for Art and Urban Resources, Inc., Long Island City, N.Y.

1976 24 x 24, Sarah Lawrence College Gallery, Bronxville, N.Y.

1976 Project Rebuild: An Exhibition to Aid Earthquake-Damaged Udine, Grey Art Gallery, New York University, N.Y.C.

1975 Unique Works on Paper, An exhibition of drawings, van Straaten Gallery Chicago, Ill.

1975 Fourteen Abstract Painters, Frederick S. Wight Art Gallery, University of California, Los Angeles, Calif.

1975 3 Painters from Iowa Living in New York: Kyle Morris, Doug Ohlson, Ray Parker, The University of Iowa Museum of Art, Iowa City, Iowa

1974 Seven New York Artists, Nielson Gallery, Boston, Mass.

1973 Inaugural Exhibition, Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.; (the inaugural exhibition of the gallery's SoHo space)

1973 Doug Ohlson, Ray Parker, Ulfert Wilke, Susan Caldwell Inc., N.Y.C.

1973 Abstract Painters, Fischbach Gallery, N.Y.C.

1973 The Way of Color, Thirty-third Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

1972 Inside Philadelphia, Selections from Private Collections, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.

1971 Highlights of the 1970-1971 Art Season, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn.

1971 American Art Attack, Browersgracht 225, Amsterdam, Holland

1971 The Structure of Color, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C.

1970 American Art Since 1960, The Art Museum, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.

1970 Modular Painting, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

1970 Painting & Sculpture Today, Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, Ind.

1969 One Man's Choice, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Tex.

1969 Prospect 69, Städtische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf, Germany

1969 American Painting, the 1960's, a travelling exhibition co-sponsored by Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia and American Federation of Arts, N.Y.C., inaugurated in Athens, Ga.

1969 Highlights of the 1968 - 1969 Art Season, Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Conn.

1969 Annual Exhibition, Contemporary American Painting, Whitney Museum of American Art, N.Y.C.

1969 Concept, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

1969 A Collector's Choice, City Art Museum, St. Louis, Mo.

1969 The Art of the Real, USA 1948 - 1968, Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.C.; travelled to Kunsthaus Zurich; Tate Gallery, London; Grand Palais, Paris

1968 The Pure and the Clear: American Innovations, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, Pa.

1968 The Weatherspoon Annual Exhibition/Art On Paper 1968, Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

1968 Listening to Pictures, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y.

1967 Structural Art, travelling exhibition organized by American Federation of Arts: inaugurated at University of Omaha, Omaha, Nebr.

1967 Color, Image and Form, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, Mich.

1967 Art Festival, Galerie Müller, Stuttgart and Cologne, Germany

1965 A Spring Festival of Contemporary Painting, White Museum, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.

1964 Hard/Op, Daniels Gallery, N.Y.C.

1964 Eight Young Artists, Hudson River Museum, Yonkers, N.Y.; travelled to Bennington College, Bennington, Vt.

1964 Museum Purchase Fund Collection, travelling exhibition organized by American Federation of Arts, N.Y.C.; installed at State University College, Potsdam, N.Y.

1964 Directions 1964, Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

1961 The Second Minnesota Biennial, Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minn.; travelled to Rochester Art Center, Winona State College, and St. John's University (all in Minnesota)

Selected Bibliography:

2001 Vincent Katz. "Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre," Art in America, July

1996 Carter Ratcliff "Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre," Art in America, June

1995 Eugene C. Goossen. "Doug Ohlson's Painting," ArtNet Magazine, www.artnet.com

1994 Lilly Wei. "Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre," Art in America, April

1992 Richard Waller. Doug Ohlson Recent Paintings, Catalogue for the exhibition, Marsh Gallery, University of Richmond, Richmond, Va.

1991 Walter Thompson. "Doug Ohlson at Andre Zarre," Art in America, January

1987 Walter Thompson. "Doug Ohlson at Ruth Siegel," Art in America, May

1987 Ellen Lee Klein. "Doug Ohlson," Arts Magazine, April

1987 Ellen Lee Klein. "Square and . . .," Arts Magazine, February

1986 Steven Henry Madoff. Doug Ohlson: Paintings, 1984 - 1985, catalogue of the exhibition, Ruth Siegel Ltd, N.Y.

1985 Peter Iden, with Rolf Lauter. Bilder für Frankfurt, Bestandskatalog des Museums für Moderne Kunst, Prestel-Verlag, Munich, Germany

1985 John Russell. "Doug Ohlson," The New York Times, 8 November

1983 Jane Necol, with Maurice Poirier "The 60s in Abstract: 13 Statements and an Essay," Art in America, October

1983 Lawrence Campbell. "Review of Exhibitions," Art in America, May

1982 Eugene C Goossen. Two Decades, 1962-82, exhibition catalog, Bennington College, Bennington, Vt.

1982 Robert Yoskowitz. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, September

1982 Jon Hutton. "Dialogue; Conversations With Ray Parker and Doug Ohlson," Arts Magazine, April

1982 John Russell. The New York Times, 19 March

1981 John Russell. The New York Times, 23 January

1981 Robert Yoskowitz. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, March

1979 Robert Yoskowitz. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, December

1978 Carter Ratcliff. "A Prejudiced Guide to the Art Market," New York Magazine, 27 Nov.

1978 Carter Ratcliff. "Doug Ohlson's Color Condensations," Art in America, May/June

1978 Ellen Lubell. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, February

1977 Michael Walls. "Doug Ohlson Recent Paintings," brochure for the exhibition, Portland Center For The Visual Arts, Portland, Ore.

1977 Patricia Failing. "Doug Ohlson: In Classic Abstract," Sunday Oregonian, Portland, Ore., 18 December

1977 Denise Wolmer. "In the Galleries," Arts Magazine, May

1977 John Perreault. The SoHo Weekly News, 3 February

1977 John Russell. The New York Times, 7 Jan

1976 Peter Schjeldahl. "Review of Exhibitions," Art in America, September/October

1976 Carter Ratcliff. "New York Letter," Art International, Lugano, Switzerland, Summer

1976 Charlotte Thorp. Arts Magazine, June

1976 Corinne Robins. The SoHo Weekly News, 22 April

1976 John Perreault. The SoHo Weekly News, 8 April

1975 William Zimmer. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, September

1975 Noel Frackman. "Arts Reviews," Arts Magazine, September

1975 Carter Ratcliff. "New York," Art Spectrum, Lugano, Switzerland, February

1975 Roberta Smith. "Reviews," Artforum, Feb

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Awards:

1968 Fellowship, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation
1968 PSC/CUNY Faculty Creative Arts Award, City University of New York
1974 Artist Grant, Creative Artists Public Service, New York State Council on the Arts
1976 Artist Grant, National Endowment for the Arts

Selected Public Collections:

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Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Dallas, Tex.
Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Mass.
Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum, Hagen, Germany
Lowe Art Museum, Miami, Fla.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, N.Y.C.
Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minn.
Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland
Museum fur Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt, Germany
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
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