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DIALOGUE: CONVERSATIONS WITH RAY PARKER AND DOUG OHLSON

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From their Midwest origins to present Hunter College faculty positions, Ray Parker and Doug Ohlson have many common experiences and personal and professional connections, as well as certain shared aesthetic concerns.



Ray Parker, *Lines on Blue*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 24½ x 30". Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

Doug Ohlson, *Red Variation*, 1979. Oil on canvas, 52 x 54". Courtesy Susan Caldwell Gallery.

No friendship would seem more natural than that of painters Ray Parker and Doug Ohlson. From Midwest origins to present Hunter College faculty positions, their common experiences and personal and professional connections, as well as certain shared aesthetic concerns, have encouraged a continuing dialogue that has now spanned some twenty years.

Conversations with each of them on the occasions of recent exhibitions at the Susan Caldwell Gallery (and of Parker's two shows at the Betty Cuningham and the Joe Grippi Galleries) suggested to me that a joint exploration of their ideas and observations would be both stimulating and illuminating. In three taped sessions in one or the other of their studios, our discussions touched a wide range of topics, including reviews of their careers, personal reminiscences of artists and exhibitions, technical aspects of their work, working methods, ideas about color, drawing, composition, movement, space and scale, sources and the question of content, time and memory, analogies with music, problems of verbal description, and others.

On Color

JH: Both of you seem to have consistently made color a primary issue, if not *the* primary issue, of your painting. How would you characterize its role in your work?

RP: I never thought about color.

DO: You stole that line from Rothko.

RP: (Laughs) That is a story, it's true, but I don't think I stole it from him. I answered his questioning me by saying that I was interested in color—in the "stroke" or "all-over" paintings, as we used to call them in the early '50s, where I made many, many colors drifting and crossing each other, whereupon he said, "I am not interested in color." I think he didn't want to be committed to saying that he was a color painter, suspecting whatever that might come to be as a label. I thought at the time I saw his work, that late night in his studio, that there wasn't much more to his painting than color, because he'd make a totemic format so simple that it contained nothing else than those slightly ragged, bulging shapes which were colored and often scumbled with more color.

DO: He didn't just naturally come up with wine-red and a kind of brown on a covered-up cadmium red surface. That didn't *just* occur.

RP: Nor do you in your painting—

DO: Absolutely not. I struggle with it.

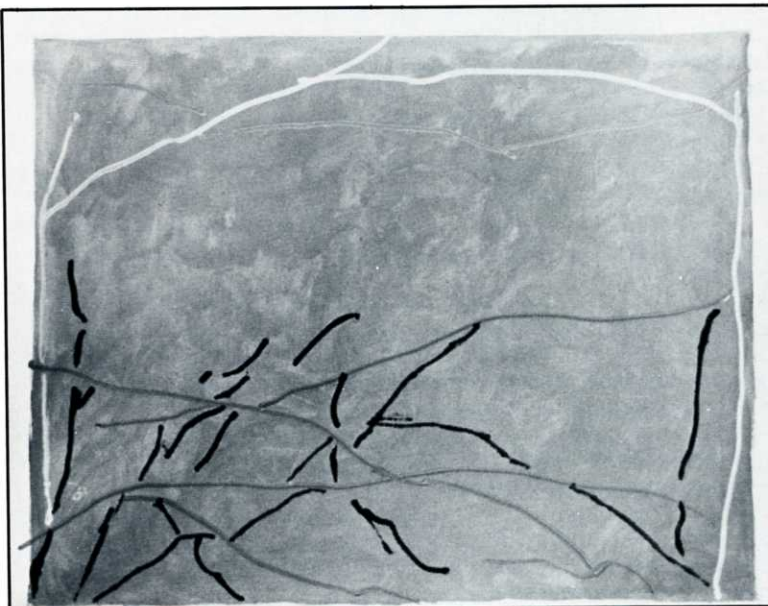
RP: But I really don't struggle with color. I don't think about it. It's an easy way of getting out of the question of color, not to think about it.

DO: "Think about it" maybe isn't the right phrase, but you see it, right? You put it down, you see it, and on occasion you change it, and that's thinking about it, right?

RP: You say this should be more purple.

DO: Whatever. It doesn't mean you sit around and think about color. That's a lie! I can't imagine it. What would you think about? (Laughs)

RP: Ulfert Wilke and I had this discussion in which we decided that all reds go together. More recently he said in a letter to me



Ray Parker, *Lines on a Gray Background*. 1980. Oil on canvas, 48 x 60". Private Collection. Courtesy Betty Cuningham Gallery.

that he'd decided all colors go together, with which I agree and which I've done for a long time now. It doesn't make a bit of difference whether it's green or purple. If a painting looks good after you've made it, then it's good and not because of the combinations Albers thought about, for instance.

JH: What sorts of influences did other artists have on your own approaches to color?

DO: I think the person who started me thinking about it, visually thinking about it, was an Algerian-French painter who studied at the Beaux-Arts named Freddie Munoz. So it comes from *school*. Color was something you put down to define an area or possibly spatial usage, those sorts of things. I guess the Beaux-Arts in those days was involved in sort of an Impressionist position. I would set up some color situation, but not really thinking about it as color. Munoz would say, "You can't use black," for instance, and he'd show different ways that you could use a viridian or a phthalocyanine blue or Prussian blue, something that would enact the role of black but that would take a different spatial connotation. He didn't want them repeated either. His idea of course was to make the space weave in a color sense. That probably had a lot of effect on me.

JH: Ray, when you began the "simple paintings," were there issues current in other artists' work that started you in that direction?

RP: No, my work was original in that regard, that I did not think about anybody else but was just trying to make color be or say something by itself. Those isolated spots of color came to me

